
Alright, well Merry Christmas. I want to just say hello to everybody gathering at all of our physical locations as well as those of you joining us online. We're so glad to have you with us.

If you are just now joining us, I realize that it's Christmas, so maybe you're here with family members, maybe you're watching with your in-laws right now, and maybe you haven't been with us over the last several weeks.

We've actually been in a series of messages called *Anxious Christmas*. And what we've been doing is, we've been looking at the very first Christmas story as a guy named Luke records it in the New Testament. And we've just been examining some of the key people who would have been directly involved with that first Christmas story.

In particular we've looked at the Old Testament prophecies, or promises, the people who were all involved in that. We've looked at Mary and Joseph. And just one of the things that we've pointed out is that on that first Christmas their feeling of anxiety would have been at an elevated level. And I think that that's something that all of us, regardless of who you are or how you're wired can relate to, especially this year.

I mean, every year around the holidays it seems like anxiety, loneliness, and depression always go up. But then you put a year like 2020 on top of that and it's just through the roof. So, we've been looking at what God was doing then to try to help make sense of what he is doing now.

The group of people who I want to look at with you tonight in the Christmas story, it's a group of people who we normally take for granted. We assume that they were in the story because it just kind of looks good. They are in the Nativity. We've never really questioned it.

But what I want to do is question it tonight. I want to really ask the question, "Why were they there?" As we talk about this group of people, they would have been the kind of people who were like, "I don't really know that I deserve to be a part of this story. I don't really know that I have a voice. I don't really know that I've done anything to be on the platform with Jesus."

I don't know about you, but I've certainly felt that way several times in my life. There have been moments when I've just felt like I'm in over my head—moments when I felt like I was unworthy and unqualified. Like, I shouldn't be in the position that I'm in.

I remember it started for me when I was 15 years old. I remember this very clearly. The president of the United States at the time came to my home town in Joplin, Missouri to give a speech. And to my knowledge, no sitting president had ever been to my home town. There was no reason to be.

And I was trying to figure out why he came through. I wondered if maybe it was because there was a cancellation in another important city somewhere, so he just came to our hometown as kind of a consolation sort of thing.

But I remember about a week before he was going to be there, some very important people showed up at my school. And they were looking for volunteers. And they said, "We're expecting capacity crowds at the college where he is going to speak."

And there was field right across the street from the stadium where he was going to be delivering his speech. And they were going to use that for parking. And they were looking for some teenagers to show up early and direct traffic and park cars.

And they said, "If you volunteer for this afterward, when the president gives his speech you can actually sit on the platform behind him as he is delivering his talk, you might even end up on TV." And that was enough for me and my friends. We were like, "Man, we're doing it."

So we showed up at this meeting and they were giving us all of the specifics about when we needed to show up, it was before the sun came up. And where we needed to be.

There was even a dress code if you can believe that. They were like, "You need to wear khaki pants and a button up blue polo. I didn't have either one of those, so my mom took me to J C Penny's just to get those. They didn't even give us one of those yellow safety vests like we get now-a-days. They didn't care. They just wanted us to look good.

I remember the night before the president's speech, I was so nervous. I couldn't sleep. It was like Christmas night. And I got up really early. And I drove down to the college. And there was this palpable energy descending upon my home town. I'd never experienced it before.

There were helicopters in the sky. There were snipers on the roof tops. There were thousands and thousands of people all around. It felt like I was a part of something so much bigger than myself.

Then after we got done parking cars, we got to take our place on the stage behind the president. And I remember sitting there, very vividly thinking to myself—I mean he was just a few feet away—and I'm sitting there thinking, "How in the world did I get here? How in the world did I get on this platform?" And I'm just wondering if any of you have ever had an experience, maybe not exactly like that, but kind of like that.

Maybe it was the day that you pulled away from the hospital after bringing a child into the world. You were like, "How in the world did I get qualified to take care of one of these? I can't really take care of myself."

Maybe it was the day you showed up to the job of your dreams and you were like, "Am I really ready for this?" Maybe it was the day you walked an aisle. Maybe it was the day you signed a contract. I don't know.

You ever felt in over your head? And you're like, "I don't really know that I deserve this platform?" If so, then you can at least begin to relate to the shepherds in the story of the birth of the Messiah.

I want to pick this up in Luke, chapter 2. If you have a Bible or a Bible app, please go ahead and turn there and follow along with me. If not, totally okay. I'm going to put this up on the monitor beside me so you can follow along.

In the first seven verses of Luke, he's already told us about the main event, the birth of Jesus. Now, I want to pick it up on where we oftentimes, at least this is true for me, I sort of trail off after that. I mean, Jesus' birth is the big deal, right?

But Luke has more to tell us. And he says in verse 8:

"That night," referring to the night that Jesus was born, *"there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby,"* so they were local, they were close by, *"guarding their flocks of sheep."*

Now, I don't know about you, but I have never questioned that. I've never thought, "Luke, why would you turn that corner? Why would you go from the main event and then all of a sudden tell us about a group of shepherds who are watching over their sheep nearby?" I mean, yeah. Shepherds are a part of the Christmas story. Never really questioned it.

In fact, every Christmas pageant that my parents forced me to be a part of, it seems like I was a shepherd, because that was the only part that they thought I was really good at. I always wanted to be Joseph. They never let me be Joseph. They were like, "Hey, Aaron. Could you stand there in your dad's oversized bathrobe, with a staff made out of cardboard? Can you glue cotton balls to your face to look like a beard? Can you do that Aaron?"

"I think so."

"Okay, you've got the role of a shepherd. Alright? Just stay over there. Don't say anything. You're qualified."

That is the role I always had. And I never really questioned it. Just, they were in the story.

But what I want us to look at is that shepherds would have been the last kind of people or group of people that you would ever think would hear about the birth of the Messiah. They were the first ones. You would think that they would be the last ones, that they would be on down the line, because they had no platform, they had no power, they had no position, they had no voice, really, in society.

In fact, in the first century for a group of people to say, "Who are the very first people to hear about the birth of the Messiah?"

"Oh, the shepherds."

That might have been enough to discredit the whole story.

So why does Luke tell us? I'm not really sure what comes to your mind when you think about a shepherd. I realize it's not necessarily a sought-after occupation now a days. So I don't really know what you think about.

But for the longest time, I always thought that shepherds looked something like Gandalf from the *Lord of the Rings*. He just looks so sophisticated, and so powerful. I guarantee that staff is not made out of cardboard. And his beard is just epic. And you see that figure and you're like, "I don't want to mess with that guy."

I can tell you this. If that's your image of a shepherd, then it's way off. Because, for starters, most shepherds wouldn't have been old men. They would have been young boys. Many of them would have been young, nomads, orphans, because they would have been abandoned or maybe even sold by their families to pay off family debt. They were forgotten in society.

In fact, there was this philosopher in Alexandria, which was kind of the center of the intellectual world at the time, and he had this to say about shepherds, "There is no more disreputable an occupation than that of a shepherd." They were the lowest of the low.

Now I don't want to overstate this because, here's the deal. The idea of a shepherd has certainly been redeemed throughout Scripture. If you've been in church for a while, maybe you've heard the term *shepherding*. This is like the idea that somebody is watching over you, mentoring you, caring for you. God, himself, refers to himself as an uppercase Shepherd in Psalm 23. See, that's what God does. God takes lowly images and redeems them.

What I want you to know is that before the Bible redeems the idea of a shepherd, they weren't really looked very highly upon. They were forgotten at best. Look what it says in verse 9. Luke tells us that suddenly, so this is like a surprise, it happens all at once:

"... an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them."

So get the image. It's late at night. It's dark. And they are out watching their sheep, doing whatever they are doing half the time, playing cards, doing whatever and all of a sudden, an angel shows up.

Now, once again, I don't know what you envision in your mind's eye when you think about an angel: wings, halos, white robes, maybe those Precious Moments figurines. I don't know. But I can almost guarantee you that's wrong too because angels were most often described as intimidating warriors.

In fact, there is this guy named Daniel in the Old Testament, he has an encounter with an angel. Listen to his description of the angel:

"I looked up and saw a man dressed in linen clothing, with a belt of pure gold around his waist. His body looked like a precious gem. His face flashed like lightning, and his eyes flamed like

torches. His arms and feet shone like polished bronze, and his voice roared like a vast multitude of people.”

I don't know. Sounds like somebody you'd find on the WWE. But this is the description of an angel. So could you just imagine being a bunch of shepherd boys, no family, out in an open field, the middle of the night doing whatever they are doing and all, of a sudden, an angel shows and it says that the light of the glory of God surrounded them. And you know there would have been a loud boom that came along with it.

It's this idea... Have you ever gone to a matinee movie in an actual movie theater, remember those? Like way back when you used to do that in 2019? You go to a movie in the afternoon, and you forget that it's the afternoon. Most of the time you go to a movie it's in the evening.

This has happened to me, especially in the summer. You're in a dark, dark theater and you get done and then—you're in one of those theaters where you automatically exit out into the parking lot and it's the middle of the afternoon and the sun is shining, and you walk outside—it is painful. The light just blinds you. You can't even open your eyes. Now, take that times a million.

You ever get up really, really early in the morning before the sun comes up. You're not awake. You haven't had your coffee yet. You're on your way to an appointment or wherever you've got to go to, and you forgot that the night before you were jamming out to Taylor Swift, the highest volume level ever. And you get in the car and you start it and it's like—boom! Scares you to death. Take that times a million.

And so this angel shows up with a blinding light and a deafening sound, which explains the shepherd's response. Check it out:

“They were terrified...”

I bet. I bet one of them peed himself. I bet you he did. And they are standing there, they are like scared to death. Maybe they are thinking, “I'm in the dark. Nobody is seeing what I am doing. You hide things in the dark and all of a sudden—boom—there's this light that comes around you.

But I love the angel's response. The warrior angel says these words:

“...but the angel reassured them. ‘Don't be afraid!’”

Man, I love that. It's like, “Listen. I'm not here to shame you. I'm not here to expose you. I'm not here to intimidate you. In fact, I'm here to share with you a bit of information that is going to totally change your life. And the angel goes on and says:

“I bring you good news that will bring great joy to,” who? *“to all people.”* He didn't say, “Hey, I'm bringing good news that will bring great joy to the religious people; bring you good news and great joy to the rich people; to the people who have it all together. No, to all.

The Christmas story is for everyone. This is good news for everyone, regardless of who you are, where you've been, what you currently believe—maybe some of the false narratives that you believe about yourself.

“Hey, I've got good news for you forgotten shepherd boys out in the field.” It's for anyone who has ever felt unworthy, unqualified, or unloved, verse 11:

“The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem,” “Hey guys, not far from where you're at,” *“the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”*

And here's this word again, verse 13:

“Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.’”

Right then. Lights out. Volume turned all of the way back down. They are gone. And it's just the shepherds with their sheep. Verse 15:

“When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, ‘Let's go to Bethlehem!’” Now, this is just for free. This has no meaning or value to the message whatsoever.

I'd just like to tell you, when I'm reading through Scripture, I oftentimes try to imagine what they would have sounded like when they say things. And for whatever reason, just as I was studying this last week, I thought to myself, “You know what? I'd like to say that they said this in a surfer's kind of accent. You know, the turtle in *Finding Nemo*? “Oh, let's go to Bethlehem. Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

Why not? They've got nothing better to do. They're just a bunch of shepherd boys. Like, “Hey, we're kind of tired of watching the sheep anyway. It's not far away, it's just right over there. The angel told us. Let's go check it out for ourselves. So verse 16:

“They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened,” Don't miss that. They go from being receivers of the message to now contributors to the message. They become the mouthpiece of God.

They told everyone, *“what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often.”*

I've often wondered what Mary really thought in that moment. I would imagine—especially for those of you ladies who have given birth to children—I would imagine in the delivery room that's a really magical moment where you just are kind of treasuring all of those things in your heart. I bet you Mary was doing that too.

But I also wonder, it says that after the shepherds arrive—I wonder if Mary is looking around. She sees Joe. She sees farm animals. She sees the star. She looks at Jesus in the manger and then she pans over, and she sees a group of shepherd boys, “Joe, who are they? Why are they in the delivery room? Are they your nephews that I didn’t know about? Why are they here?” I wonder if Mary had that thought.

And in verse 20 it says:

“The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.”

See, this whole experience fundamentally changed these guys. Now here’s the question that I have. Why are they in the story? They don’t have a platform. They don’t have any political clout. They don’t have any power. They were not social media influencers. Why did the angel go to them?

I would imagine that there were more important people that the angel could have gone to first to tell about the birth of the Messiah. I would imagine that there were more effective communicators of this the angel could have told to get the message out there much more effectively. But these are just a group of forgotten shepherd boys. They are sort of like on the low end of the totem pole in society. Why are they in the story? Why are they the first to be told?

Here’s what I’d like to suggest. I think the reason why is because God is sending a message to anyone and everyone who has ever felt like they don’t have a voice. To anyone and everyone who has ever felt like they are unworthy. To anyone and everyone who doesn’t feel like they have a platform, who thinks that nobody cares about them.

To anyone and everyone who feels like they’ve messed up too many times for God to use in any significant way, which by the way everything I just said should include all of us, regardless of what we’ve accomplished in this lifetime.

God is sending a message that there is no such thing as unworthy people. God is sending a message that he sent Jesus for anyone and everyone. Here’s the deal. When the light comes on in somebody’s life it changes whoever that person might be for good. And that is the message of the Christmas story.

You know, by far, one of my favorite Christmas traditions is the lights. Hands down, more than anything else, I love the lights of Christmas. I love driving through neighborhoods. I love seeing how people decorate their houses. I love lights on buildings and on trees.

In fact, one of our staff members, Eric Pendley, every year he goes all out. And the picture of his house really doesn’t do it justice. He actually sent me a video along with a picture and it’s so busy. There are lights flashing everywhere, and his electric bill triples in December.

Eric told me that he spends over 40 hours every year hanging up these lights. There are over 10,000 bulbs. It's moving. It's set to music. I drove my girls over there the other night to take a look at it. I just about had an epileptic seizure. My dog won't even look at me anymore, scared him to death.

But Eric, every year he does this, and he will pick one word as a theme and you can't see it in the picture, but he'll shine it against the house. And this year, the one-word theme is hope. I asked him about it, and he said, "Well, we've had a year like 2020 and more people are looking for hope than ever before."

I said, "Eric, why do you do this?" Those of you who know Eric—he's a pretty eccentric personality. I mean, everybody loves Eric. He's great. And so it doesn't surprise me that that's his house. Please pray for his wife. But he doesn't do it to get attention.

I asked Eric, "Why do you do this?" And he said, "Well, because I see the looks of happiness on adults and kids' faces who see this every year." And he said, "Also, this has started more conversations with people than ever before as to why I do this, and I always talk to them about the light of Jesus that comes into a dark, dark world."

See, the tradition of Christmas lights started back in the 17th century. Did you know this? It started in Germany where they would light candles and somehow, they would figure out how to hang them in trees, sounds real safe—a lot of fires that year—and ever since then it's just sort of developed into this tradition.

So when you drive through the neighborhoods and you see the lights on the trees and on the buildings, it isn't just pretty decorations. This comes out of a rich tradition of Jesus, the Light of the world. And when he brings the light, it can't help but illuminate into life, after life, after life. It all started with those shepherds.

In fact, the prophet Isaiah says this:

"The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine."

You know, the world has always been dark, but I can't think of a darker year in my lifetime than the one we are currently living in. I would imagine that many of you feel the same. And there's a lot about that that is discouraging and a lot about that that is frustrating. We're all emotionally exhausted.

And yet, I want you to know that it's when things are at their darkest, that the light shines the brightest. Isn't that true? You want to see the beauty of a candle? You don't go outside in the middle of a sunny afternoon and light a candle. If you want to see the beauty of a candle, go into a pitch-black room and light that candle and you're going to appreciate the light all the more.

So, going back to Eric's theme of hope, I can't help but be hopeful that God is up to something big, because historically when things are at their darkest, that's when the light of God is about to shine the brightest.

In fact, did you hear about the Bethlehem star that popped up a couple of nights ago? See this on the news? Apparently, Jupiter and Saturn got the closest that they had been in over 400 years, creating what looks like a really, really bright star in the sky. We haven't seen it for 400 years.

I was super excited about it. I couldn't wait see it. Monday afternoon it was clear, blue, sunny skies. I was like, "Man, I'm going to go home and I'm going to grab my family. We're going to get in the truck. We're going to get a good view of the sunset and then we'll look at the Bethlehem star.

And it was overcast on Monday. That is so 2020. So I didn't get to see it personally. But I saw pictures. And I just, I don't mean to speculate this. But I just kind of wondered, for 400 years we haven't seen this star. God chose 2020 to show it to us again.

See, I want you to know that when Jesus was born, he brought a light into a really, really dark world. That's why the angel calls it good news. In fact, I want to make this observation that when Jesus was born, there was a blazing star in the middle of the night that just illuminated the darkness.

Thirty-three years later, when he hung on a cross, there was an eclipse in the middle of the day. Isn't that ironic? The reason why is because Jesus is literally the Light of the world.

And today he is offering hope. He is speaking purpose into the lives of all people. Today, I'm just wondering if you might be willing to take him up on his offer.

I realize that there may be a number of people who are like, "Well, I don't know if this is for me," for any number of reasons. Maybe you had a bad church experience in your past. Maybe you don't see yourself as religious. Maybe you've got some questions like how do God and science reconcile? All of that stuff.

Those are all really, really good questions—stuff we can unpack later. I just want to ask you to just do simply this. Would you be willing to just receive the light of Jesus Christ? Would you be willing to just kind of throw your hands up and say, "God, I'm sort of at the end of my rope. I'm on my last leg. I'm emotionally exhausted right now. I need some light in the darkness."?

I just want to look right into the camera. I know I'm speaking to somebody, whether it's somebody physically in the room or somebody online in a living room or a kitchen or a car somewhere. And I want you to know that you are not forgotten and that you are more loved than you could possibly imagine.

And there is a God who had you in mind when he sent his Son to bring a light into the darkness. It is not too late. And the darkness never has the final say. Jesus has come to be a light and to bring a light when the world was at its darkest.

And today might be the day when you turn a corner and you begin to realize that he will give you purpose when you are looking for purpose, he'll give you peace when the world is chaotic. He'll give you hope when you feel hopeless. It's what he does. It's what he's always done. That's what he is offering to you today.

Father, we come to you right now and I thank you for the story of Christmas. Thank you so much that it is not boring, even though at times we make it mundane. God, thank you that it is so unusual to get our attention to show us that you care about every single person. That the birth of the Messiah was for all people. And this is blazingly clear when we look at the very first people you told, a group of forgotten shepherd boys.

So, God, may we remember that you have not forgotten us. That you have a purpose and a plan for every single individual in this room. We thank you for the message of Christmas. We thank you for the hope that you bring. We thank you for the light that shines the brightest in the darkness.

God, as we bring our horrendous year to a close and as we go into 21, God, I pray that hope would rise. I pray that you would renew our strength as we've been waiting on you. That you would give us strength, the reserves that we didn't even know that we had, because you're a good, good Father and we are in desperate need of your love and your guidance and your peace. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.