

## **A Strange Thing Happened on the Way to Bethlehem**

**“WHO’S THAT KNOCKING AT MY DOOR?”**

Isaiah 55:3-13, Zephaniah 3:14-17, Luke 2:8-20

When I was growing up, my father was the pastor at the Saxeville Baptist Church. Being a preacher’s family, we were often visited by a number of different sorts of people. Sometimes it was those who were in trouble, who would show up at our door late at night with a request for help. Sometimes it was someone dropping off something for the church. Sometimes it was folks desiring to get married and my father would counsel them in preparation for their wedding. But there was one person who visited our home that completely amazed me. His name was Mr. Feathers.

I never knew his first name, but he was an odd fellow. As far as I know he was a bachelor all his life, and when I knew him he was an old man living out of town a few miles in a run-down old home, down a long driveway, set deep into a field next to a stand of pine trees.

Mr. Feathers was a very peculiar man. He was balding, but wore long hair, and had an especially long and bushy grey beard that often carried the left-overs from some meal that he had eaten earlier. His hygiene was tremendously poor, his fingernails were long and yellow, his teeth were also in sad shape, and he carried about him a distinct odor that permeated the surroundings wherever he went. His only mode of transportation was an old 1956 Ford tractor that went 3 miles per hour at top speed.

As a youngster, I was afraid of him. He would visit our house from time to time and my father would graciously invite him in to enjoy a cup of coffee or just a drink of water. Mr. Feathers never asked us for anything, that I know of, but he seemed to come just to have a safe place to visit and have conversation.

There was one day when my father was not at home, but in drove Mr. Feathers on his Ford tractor. He slowly got off the tractor and came to our door. My 2 brothers and I were the only ones at home at the time, so we pretended not to be home at all. Mr. Feathers knocked, then waited, and knocked some more, but the three of us didn’t dare go to the door to let him in. He was just scary. Eventually, he turned away and got back on his tractor and left, hopefully convinced that no one was at home.

Now, I share this story with you because Mr. Feathers was the closest thing I knew of who would fit the description of a shepherd. Unkempt, smelly, long fingernails, yet longing for acceptance from anyone who would take them in. They were loners, taking care of their sheep or goats, roughing it in the hills and valleys, providing for the needs of their flocks. But they were the lowest of the low, and even still today shepherds are not very high on the social acceptance scale. But they are people, deserving respect and dignity just like the rest of us, yet hardly getting either from too many people. So they make their livelihood in simple living, enjoying the beauty of God's great outdoors in a way we will never know.

When we think of people like the shepherds, like Mr. Feathers, we wonder how they could live like that. We question why they don't straighten up and live like the rest of us. We often make fun of them and make them the brunt of cruel jokes. We don't understand them, so we criticize them. But unfortunately we rarely offer to help them out. How could anyone love them? How could anyone even stand to be with them? Despite all this, however, God knows them and loves them, even as they are.

This is the setting and background for the lesson of today's Gospel reading found in Luke 2:8-20. Listen to what God does to announce the birth of His Son, Jesus. (READ Luke 2:8-20)

The angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds, to the folks most of us ignore or are repulsed by. He didn't go to common, ordinary, upstanding townspeople, but to the outcast, the destitute, the despicable, and the lonely shepherds. He didn't proclaim the Good News of Great Joy to the hierarchy of the peoples, the kings or the priests or the aristocracy. The angel of the Lord went to the lowest of the low, the bottom of the barrel, what some people call the scum of the earth.

Why? Why would the angel of the Lord go to the shepherds and not to the likes of us to announce the birth of our Savior, Jesus? Because they knew their place in society. They knew that there was nothing else for them but isolation, and seclusion, and segregation, and ridicule, and persecution. But they were the ones truly longing for the coming of the Messiah who would make everyone equal in God's sight. They were the ones eagerly longing for forgiveness, and reconciliation,

and understanding. They were the ones who were quiet enough to listen for the still small voice of the Lord their God. God had made them, just like He had made each one of us, and He loved them as much as He loves each one of us.

So God's angel goes to the shepherds in order to proclaim to them, "*Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, He has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, IS WITH YOU...The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in His love He will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing*" (Zephaniah 3:14-15,17)!

The visit of the angel of the Lord to the shepherds proved to them that the Lord knew them, loved them, desired to be with them and was now in their presence. So he announced to them, "*Today, in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger*" (Luke 2:11-12).

A Savior for all the people of the world! Not just for the strong and powerful, not just for the popular and the important, not just for the rich and famous, but for ALL PEOPLE! Everyone, everywhere, even to the lowest of the low, for the haves and the have nots, for the locals and the foreigners, for all those who will believe in Him and receive Him as their Messiah, their Savior. Jesus Christ was born here onto the earth for all of us!

THAT'S THE GOOD NEWS THAT THE SHEPHERDS HEARD! And that's the Great Good News for all of us! God has given us the greatest Gift that was ever given to the world, the Gift of His own Son, Jesus, Immanuel (God with us), Christ the Lord!

The shepherds were in a position to hear this good news and to rejoice in it. God loved them enough to come be with them so that they might be saved. God cared enough about them to announce the birth of His Son TO THEM first. And the Messiah was not born into opulence or wealth, but in poverty and simplicity. He was born in a stable and laid in a manger, wrapped in simple swaddling

clothes for warmth and protection. His lowliness was a message for everyone, that He would be the servant of all, so that all people could come to the Lord through Him. From the highest of the high to the lowest of the low, God was inviting all people to come back to Him.

That was the best news they had ever heard in their lives! They were valued in God's eyes as being loved enough for God to bring them home to be with Him, too. They didn't deserve God's love. They couldn't merit God's Salvation. They had nothing to give back to the Lord, but one thing they could do - they could go and see this great thing that the Lord had done for them. If the hosts of heaven were singing praises of the work of the Lord our God, then they could well go and see this mighty work.

*“So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger”* (Luke 2:16). Nothing in the world was more important at that moment than to see what the Lord had done for the world. And nothing in the world was going to stop them from going to see the Messiah.

So imagine Joseph and Mary's surprise when the lowest of the low come knocking at their door. Imagine the surprise when the shepherds finally find words to tell them what the Lord had proclaimed to them. Imagine the marveling sight of who knows how many stinky, long haired, bearded shepherds crowding around the manger to get a glimpse of this marvelous gift of God for all people. This was their Savior, their Messiah! Here was the hope they had so longed for. God loved them, even THEM! And here was the proof, a child *“wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”*

What joy welled up within their hearts! They couldn't wait to share this Great Good News with everyone around them. They were the blessed of God, the first to behold His Savior. *“When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this Child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them”* (Luke 2:17-18). This was their gift to the Christ Child, to make known His birth and to praise God for His humble beginnings. Their joy was their gift back to the Lord for the fulfilling of His promises.

But who would listen to the likes of shepherds, the likes of Mr. Feathers, the likes of anyone of the lowest of the low? No matter what they proclaim, they are still treated with disrespect and doubt.

They are still looked upon as scum, dreamers, storytellers, THEM!

We're not told if anyone took the news of the shepherds to heart and went to see the Messiah, the child wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger, in a stinky stable, surrounded by farm animals. It seems that the world continued to go on in its own pace, doing life as usual, disregarding the astounding news that the shepherds had given to them. After all, who could believe a shepherd? Who could ever take Mr. Feathers seriously for anything good of what the Lord had done? Who would listen to them and believe them, much less go to see if what they said was true.

How about you? Are you so busy that you ignore the good news given to you in our world today? Are you so great that you would not believe the simple message of what God has done for us from one of such low regard? Are you so knowledgeable that you would pay no attention to the account of what God has done in the life of a simple person? Are you so proud that you would write off whatever was told to you by a street person?

Isaiah 55 calls us to *“Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David...Seek the Lord while He may be found; call on Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and He will have mercy on them, and to our God, for He will freely pardon. ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord”* (Isaiah 55:3, 6-8).

The voice of the Lord is calling out to us today, inviting us to hear this Great Good News and to respond with our hearts and minds to follow Him. But are we so busy as to let that message go unheard, or unacted upon? And if we hear the Good News, are we egotistical or ashamed enough that we keep this marvelous message to ourselves? We may hear the Good News, but if we don't receive it into our hearts, we're not going to share this life-saving message with anyone else.

Folks, the world is dying to hear this great Good News of the Lord, that Salvation has come to all who will believe in Jesus Christ, and turn to Him and follow Him. Our society is craving something that

makes a difference in the lives of the people, and yet, we're holding out on them. This is the wondrous love of God given to us in this magnificent gift of His Son, and yet we can barely admit that we're a follower ourselves. We don't dare stand out as being different in the way we live or speak or treat others, so we just blindly follow the ways of the world and continue to treat others with disrespect and disregard.

God is calling us to hear His great Good News of Jesus, and then to believe it, and then to receive it into us so that our whole lives are changed by the Salvation that He offers to us. And we are to be so full of the love of Jesus that it overflows into the lives of those around us so much that they question us, "What's up with you?" And it gives us the chance to tell them of the marvelous work of the Lord Jesus on our behalf, bring us out of death and taking us into the life of the Lord our God.

*"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told"* (Luke 2:20). These societal rejects got it! The shepherds rejoiced greatly at what God had done for them. They believed the message of the Messiah's birth, and they put their belief into action. And when they saw all that God was doing, they could not contain themselves, but shared the great Good News with everyone around them, not caring what others would think about them, but just because of the wonderful message that God was fulfilling His promise of a Savior to the world.

But folks, we are also invited to receive this Good News and share it, too, even if the people will not listen to us. Their response does not determine the greatness of this message. And their response should not determine if we should share the message or not. It is the message that our world needs to hear! It is the hope that we can have in the bleak darkness of our society today. God's giving of His own Son to the world, for us, is the greatest news we can ever hear, too. Are you open to hear it?

We are told *"you will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thorn bush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the Lord's renown, for an*

*everlasting sign, that will endure forever” (Is. 55:12-13).*

If we are faithful in believing and receiving Jesus Christ as our Savior, our whole world will turn up-side-down for the Lord’s delight. The things that brought us disappointment and sorrow will be changed into great delight and praise because of what the Lord has done for us. And as we go with the joy of the Lord in our hearts, the whole world around us will be transformed because they, too, will hear the great message of hope and love and joy and peace.

Do you understand the potential of all of this? If we are willing to share this great Good News, we will be the ones to change the world from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from anger to joy and from disrespect to honor and praise. But it all depends upon what we do with this Good News of great joy that the Lord God has given to us. If we keep it to ourselves, the world will remain in darkness, without hope, without love, without peace, and without a future. But oh, the difference we can make if we believe what the Lord has done, and receive it into our own hearts, and then boldly proclaim that message to the world. The world is waiting for such a message.

The shepherds gift back to the Lord God for what He had given to them was to give the message of hope and life and love to all those around them. It was all they had to give, but they shared it freely.

So let me ask you this: What is the gift you bring back before the Lord in response to what He has done for you? How are you showing the love of the Lord to make a difference in the lives of those around you?

I have encountered many different ways that you are sharing the gift of God with others. There are those who spent hours and days making labor-intensive cookies to share with family and friends, as well as to the bake sale of the GMW. We are spoiled by your great love for us.

There are those who have made tender visits to our members who are in nursing homes or shut in their own homes. I cannot tell you the difference it makes in the lives of those you have cared for by taking time out of your day to go see them. It brings encouragement and reassurance that the church still cares for them.

There are those who have gone out of their way to share the little they have to touch the lives of others. Sharing a cake, offering a ride to a doctor's visit, taking a moment to talk with those who walk past the house on their daily stroll around the neighborhood, offering a few bucks to someone low on gas, sharing time to get things done here at the church, making meals for the homeless, standing by a man at work who needs encouragement at starting over after prison, or offering encouragement to a family member.

And there are those who have taken time out of their day to come and wrap Christmas presents for Safe Harbor, so that those who have been abused or treated harshly might have a new start in a safe place. It's like the gift of the shepherds, praising God in your living. Each gift may be small, but they bring great joy to those who receive it.

As we begin as a church in a new denomination, the Global Methodist Church, we have the opportunity to look around us and see the possibility to make a difference in the lives of others. When we consider the people who are knocking at our doors, or seeking our help, or calling on us to help them in love through our Lord Jesus Christ, we can bring light to the world as we proclaim boldly that we are His followers. As we share the great Good News that the Savior of the world has come for all who will receive Him, we can amaze others by our testimonies of transformation and hope.

Today, take time to see, and hear, and love on those around you who need to know they are loved by God. Be like the shepherds and tell everyone what the Lord has done. Let's pray.

Father, You have blessed us tremendously in all that we have. But it often distracts us from Your message of love and hope. Help us to quietly consider the truly marvelous work You have done through Jesus, and let that fill us with great joy so that we might be free to share with others around us. Help us lose our inhibitions and to loudly proclaim that the Lord Jesus has come in love for everyone. Thank You for giving us life and hope in Jesus, and help us to be eager to share it with those around us who need to hear it, high and low, so that everyone may come to know how important they are to the Lord our God. We praise You, in the Name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN.