

## Sermon for SJB Dec 27<sup>th</sup> 2020 Shepherds and angels

It's been a very strange Christmas this year. No need to spell it out for you. But how very strange was that first Christmas too! Very strange indeed.

Over the centuries people have woven together the various strands of the Bible accounts to form what many now believe to be a fairytale- - sung about in familiar carols- - acted out by children in familiar nativity plays- - painted in beautiful pictures- - immortalized in stained glass and crib scenes. There's nothing wrong in any of these things in themselves- - their light and loveliness lift up our hearts especially in these dark times. But a pretty **fairytale? No way.**

In the opening of his gospel Luke makes it clear that he's setting out an orderly account of real happenings, not telling a pretty story.

Indeed it's far from pretty as we well know. An unmarried pregnant girl is nearly abandoned by her fiancé. Then just when things seem to be settling down she has to follow him on a perilous journey in the last days of her pregnancy, a journey forced on them by their Roman overlords. She has to give birth far from home in the most unsuitable surroundings and her baby has only an animal's feeding trough for a cradle. Matthew gives us another part of the story involving mysterious visitors, followed by the imminent danger of the young child being murdered, driving the family to become refugees in a foreign land.

Today our focus is on the shepherds. Bethlehem is close to Jerusalem so it's very likely that they were the guardians of the flocks needed for the temple sacrifices for sin. Little did anyone in the world know it yet, but the newborn child in the manger was destined to become the lamb of god, the final sacrifice. Historians tell us that shepherds, living as they did with their animals, were considered unclean as they couldn't take part in all the rituals of their religion.

They were outside polite society, at best disregarded and at worst despised. Yet it was to these lowly characters that the news of the most extraordinary and wonderful birth in the history of the world was first revealed. We should remember too that their revered ancestor David had also been a shepherd, before being anointed by the prophet Samuel as King in their glory days of long ago

They were now living under the harsh rule of their Roman conquerors and rumours were rife. Their prophets had been promising the birth of a messiah- -a saviour- for centuries. Various self styled messiahs had already attempted to start uprisings and been summarily and brutally dealt with. We can read about all that in the histories of those times as well as in the Bible.

It's into this very real and very dark world that God chooses to come and reveal himself in a totally new and startling way, in a human baby. Lowly Shepherds are the first to know. Other humble folk will be the first to **understand**, thirty years later, what God's kingdom is really all about.

The shepherds are guarding their precious flock through the perilous night when the darkness is suddenly ablaze with angel light. It's hardly surprising that their first reaction is absolute terror! So what is the first part of the angelic message? Fear not!

Here's a good quiz question: how many times in the Bible do those words occur? Fear not! Apparently 365 times, one for every day of the year! A good one for us to remember every day during this pandemic. And why should the shepherds not be afraid? Because there is good news, the best, and it is for ALL People. ALL people. Ourselves included. The birth of a saviour.

Then they are given a most strange sign. They will find him as a baby all wrapped up and lying in- -what? A manger? A baby in a manger?

What on earth? But they don't hesitate. Leaving their precious flocks, their only security, out on the hillside, they go and search.

In the presence of a newborn child with its mother there's an innate sense of awe and wonder. All our hearts are touched by the miracle of birth. Think of the enormous popularity of call the midwife!

Well, after the initial awe and the joy of finding the child, what do the shepherds do next? They certainly don't keep it to themselves!

Excitedly they tell everyone they meet about what they've heard and seen and people are amazed. Then they return to their work praising and glorifying God.

Luke or someone close to him probably met Mary. She was there on the day of Pentecost, the birthday of the church, which Luke describes in his second book, the book of Acts, and the fact that she pondered over all of these things in her heart could only have come from her. I imagine her confidently sharing her treasured memories about the birth of her firstborn son and the visit of the shepherds. She too had been visited by the angel and would have understood very well what the shepherds were saying. It would have been another sign for herself and Joseph about their precious baby.

The final sentence of our gospel reading tells us that they were going to bring him up carefully, according to the demands of their faith. The first thing was to have him circumcised and named at eight days old, according to the law of Moses.

As we go out into our troubled world from the warmth and brightness of our service today, it would be good to ponder again the part played in the Christmas story by those lowly shepherds and its relevance to our own lives of faith. First of all, those necessary words of reassurance from the angel: "Fear Not!" Just in case you were asleep a few minutes ago, I say again that we find those words 365 times in

the Bible, one for every day of the year, so let's really take them to heart as a personal message to each one of us in our fearful times.

Then the angel's message of good news of great joy, the birth of Jesus, a saviour for all people yesterday, today and forever,.

Next their willingness to search and find for themselves the truth of what they had been told. If we are willing to search for that truth we too will find it. If it's feeling a little remote right now, try going back to Luke's gospel and reading it through again. Talk to someone about it. Happy to take phone calls!

And finally remember their reaction to what they have discovered. They definitely didn't keep it to themselves. Excitedly they shared it with any others willing to listen.

Yes, these very humble outsiders were the first to hear and to spread the good news. Since then people in every generation have spread it further and further until 2000 years later it's reached you and me.

How wonderful and amazing is that? Better than any fairytale!

Amen.