

Joke - A guy bought his wife a beautiful diamond ring for Christmas.

After hearing about this extravagant gift, a friend of his said, "I thought she wanted one of those sporty four-wheel-drive vehicles."

"She did," he replied. "But where was I going to find a fake Jeep?"

Shepherd - THE DILEMMA OF JOY

We have been looking these last few weeks at different dilemmas that the characters from that first Christmas may have experienced.

We have looked at Joseph with the dilemma of doubt, at Mary with dilemma of saying yes to what God had called her to, and last week with the innkeeper with the dilemma of belief. This week we will be looking at the Shepherd with the dilemma of joy.

But before we look at that I would like to share a few points that I think will help us on this journey.

I had mentioned the first week about Bethlehem and why God choose Jesus to be born there instead of Jerusalem. One of the biggest reasons is that it fulfilled a prophecy about this child born in a manger.

Micah 5:2 (NIV): 2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

So Jesus was born in Bethlehem to fulfill a prophecy given years before instead of Jerusalem which was 6 miles north where Jesus later would be crucified.

We looked at Joseph and how he needed to go to Bethlehem due to a census that had gone out. Mary no doubt felt obligated to go along with him even though I’m sure in her condition she would have loved to stay behind.

But here's the thing.

Proverbs 16:9 (NIV): 9 In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.

That is important for you and I to understand because the timing for this whole thing could not have been orchestrated any better.

You see Joseph was a descendant of King David so when this census happened Joseph was obligated to go.

Now maybe your not seeing the picture yet so let me help you out.

Remember Mary went into labor in this little town of Bethlehem not on the way there, not before. So think about the timing of it all if they would have stayed a little longer in Nazareth the prophecy from Micah would have failed.

Bethlehem was selected to be the place of the birth long before Joseph was even in the picture. Long before Mary and Joseph became part of the plan.

What we need to understand is that by the time of a Jesus' birth Bethlehem was the place where lambs that were purchased for sacrifice in the temple were born and raised.

No wonder John could put out. . .

John 1:29 (NIV): 29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

Jesus Christ born in a manger that word is *fatni* and would best be described as the feeding trough where the animals went to get their meal. Not a crib like we have today.

That would be a suitable place for a lamb and for a few days the Lamb of God laid in this manger a feeding trough.

Bethlehem raised lambs so there had to be shepherds and that is where we take up our story for today.

What if the message the angel of the Lord shared with the shepherds that first Christmas night was to help them overcome their dilemma of joy. Perhaps the dilemma was intended to be squelched from the start because God knew those shepherds would second guess whether or not this good news of great joy was meant not just for everybody else in the world, but also for them.

It is not uncommon for people to feel unworthy or that a gift is too good to be true...for them.

(Talk about gift for my boss).

God made sure one of His angels articulated to the shepherds that this “good news of great joy” was not just for everybody else; it was intended for “all the people,” including the shepherds out in the fields of Bethlehem.

Luke's gospel records the message and the messengers that were sent.

Luke 2:8-20 - "And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the

saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

It brought the Lord great joy to share this joyful news of the advent of the Messiah with the shepherds. They were the first to hear and the first to witness the long-awaited coming of the Christ.

God gets a kick out of doing things His way and that may not always seem to be the way the world would have done it.

Remember Proverbs, he orders our steps.

It's what the Apostle Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians when he says,

1 Corinthians 1:27-31 - "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him, you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"

The shepherds certainly were not boasting that they were the ones who should have been the first people to hear the good news of the Messiah's birth so they could share this great joy with others. No, they likely knew they were living on the low rung of society's social and occupational ladder. They perhaps were self-aware that their culture would have said any shepherds should have been the last ones in line to hear this good news.

These shepherds were simply doing their job as they did every day. It was neither a glamorous job nor a job that was viewed in high regard by the more sophisticated in

first-century Jewish society. In fact, being a shepherd was the bluest of the blue-collar jobs and considered by many to be the most minimum of the minimum wage jobs in that day. The old saying, "It's a dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it," certainly would have applied to the shepherds of biblical times and culture. Day after day these shepherds found themselves in the blood, sweat, dirt and dung that came with the territory.

And at this time they would have had extra work for this would have been the season of lambing. They now had to not only provide for and protect the sheep, but also had to attend to the birth of these infant lambs.

They had to take the extra care of these lambs that were being born because the only lambs that were allowed to be used for sacrifice were without spot, perfect with no defects at all.

Shepherds often stayed together and did not associate much with others in society thus making them social outcasts at times. However, the outsiders quickly would

become the insiders regarding what God was up to on the other side of the hills where their sheep were grazing and bedding down for the night. Their insider status immediately filled them with the understandable emotion of fear. Don't glaze over the fear that was present in the story.

Show video (Shepherds)

Their response of fear is where the shepherds' Christmas dilemma can first be found.

Luke 2:9-10 - "And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

The Lord desired to give these people "great joy" and thus had the angel call out their fear right from the start. One of the strategies of Satan is to try and flood us with fear when the Lord desires to fill us with His joy. Jesus, identifying Himself as the Good Shepherd in John 10, speaks about

this very thing.

John 10:10-11 - “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

If we are followers of Jesus, our enemy knows he can't steal our soul. However, he can continue to try and steal our joy. Sometimes we are like the shepherds who find ourselves flooded with fear and falling into the trap of the evil one who wants to steal our joy

Oh and by the way one point of the Christmas story that often times gets over looked is what Christmas is truly about. It is about much more than the manger. For see from the cradle to the cross Jesus came for a mission, for a purpose. What was it? Glad you asked. . .

1 John 3:8 (NIV): 8 The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. **The reason the Son of God appeared was to**

destroy the devil's work.

Look at that, the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

So let me ask you a question, what steals your joy? Is it the post you read on social media that put you in a negative light? Is it the bills that greeted you in your mailbox that are overdue? Is it the number that flashes on the scale you stepped on this morning? Is it hearing the update that another one of your friends got the news you have been hoping to hear for what seems like forever? Is it the quarterly report that was down below what you needed to be able to retire next year? Whatever the scene or scenario may be, you have a very real enemy that is doing all he can to steal, kill and destroy you and your joy.

And that is what Jesus came to destroy. And that is really good news.

However, the good news of Christmas reminds us that we have Savior who came to birth "great joy" inside of us with

the life that leads to abundance unaccompanied by unnecessary fear.

And even if you don't always feel like this good news is meant for you, remember what the angel of the Lord said to the shepherds who were dealing with their dilemma of joy that first Christmas night.

Luke 2:10 - "And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

The phrase "...for all people..." means that you're included in this opportunity to experience great joy no matter how you may feel about that truth. This joy is for you. Don't be afraid of it and think it's not for you, too. That's the enemy trying to convince you that you are not good enough, smart enough, clean enough, or worthy to experience this gift of joy. Never be afraid to receive what God intends to give to you. Joy is on that list.

And while God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, pause and remember this Christmas that you are part of that world that God so loves.

The good news is that a Savior was born in Bethlehem for you, for me, and for “all the people” of the whole world.

So these shepherds were part of “all the people.” And there were told to go into the city and there they would find the Lamb of God in a familiar place at least to them, He would be laying among the animals.

It's as if God was letting these shepherds in on the fact that in that manger was the Lamb of God that would take away the sins of the world. For He would be the one sacrificial lamb perfect, pure, spotless, without defects. He would be the last lamb that needed to sacrifice for he was the Lamb of God who died for the sins of the world not just for a year for for all time.

This Savior embodying good news intentionally was meant to include the socially despised, economically depressed, and religiously shunned in the world that would extend to

all the people as well. Nobody gets left out of this joyous news that leads to salvation yielding abundant life which the angel of the Lord proclaimed.

Jesus came as the sacrificial lamb to restore us to right relationship with the Father.

And when in right relationship we understand how the Father has always been, will always be Emmanuel God with us.

No wonder why John could cry out. Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.

May we receive not only this eternity altering gift of joy and grace from God, but also may we share and spread this good news with all we come into contact within our lives. That's what the shepherds did. It's what we can do this Christmas, too.

May our only dilemma be with whom we will share this joyous news first.

Next week we will close out this series looking at the wisemen.