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“The Shepherds Who Saw and the Magi Who Sought”

Sermon Series: “Four Christmas Stories”

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Scripture Lesson: Luke 2:8-19, *Matthew 2:1-11*

Do you have peace with God?

When I was in seminary, I had a classmate who, before he decided to enter the ministry, made his living as a shepherd—a literal shepherd of sheep. He’s the only shepherd I have ever known. Of course the Bible spends a lot of time talking about shepherds. The 23rd Psalm tells us that the Lord is our shepherd. In the gospel of John, Jesus calls himself the good shepherd. Because the closest most of us ever got to a sheep was the movie *Babe* or a pair of wool socks, George was our resident expert on all things with regard to shepherding. If Jesus had been described as a fraternity rush chair, I might have had some special insights. But not even the Da Vinci Code would make the case that Jesus was a frat boy.

More than once George helped us understand the deeper meaning behind a text as he described to us the secret life of shepherds. However, when we came to this passage in Luke about the shepherds leaving their flocks to find the boy Jesus laying in a manger, George was incredulous. “Those sheep were their livelihood, their family’s entire existence, to leave them for even an evening would be inviting disaster,” I remember him saying. “No shepherd would ever consider leaving his sheep behind. Those shepherds must have expected to find something pretty amazing.”

What is it that so excited these shepherds that they would risk leaving their families’ entire livelihood wandering on the hills, where they could fall prey to thieves or predators? What was worth risking everything to seek? What did the angels declare? They said they had good news—a great joy. A savior had been born. But more than that they said that this Savior would bring peace—peace with God. *“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.” Luke 1:14*

These shepherds wanted peace with God and they were willing to risk everything—their entire lives—to seek it.

This begs a question of this evening. Do you—do I—have peace with God? How can we know? I was one time counseling a husband and wife who had a very strained relationship. The wife explained the situation by saying, “we coexist.” I can always tell when my relationship with God is off track because during those times I feel like God and I simply coexist—like we are just occupying the same space. The deepest meaning of Christmas, however, is that God did not make us to just coexist with Him. He made us to commune. Communion—not coexistence—is peace with God. God’s intention and desire for our life is so much greater. On the night before he went to the cross, Jesus prayed that, as close as is He to God the Father is how close He desires to be with you and me. *“I in them and you in me,”* Jesus prayed to His Father.

So how do we get that communion with God?
How do we get that peace?

I have always had this bad habit of getting my Christmas shopping done late. You would think that as I mature, this habit, like so many bad habits, would get better—but it has not. Today I found myself out at the shopping mall, as I have been, every year in the five I have been married, looking for a gift for my wife Jen. There is actually something like a fraternity of last-minute shopping married men who together find themselves wandering around the women's department at Macy's. You can tell our number by a look in our eye that resembles some combination of sheer confusion, frustration, and panic. We usually simply greet each other with a knowing smile and a nod. We are simply too engrossed in trying to remember the proper size without, heaven forgive us, overshooting, to say anything more.

Every year I find myself renewing my membership in this exclusive fraternity and every year I pledge that I will not do this again. My own flawed human nature is surprisingly and disturbingly consistent. I want to do better, I want to be better, but I find that I cannot.

Of course, shopping on Christmas Eve is the least of my problems. That's only the one I am willing to stand up here and confess before you. I could go into exhausting details about the ever-expanding list of New Year's resolutions I have spinning around in my head waiting to be unleashed, but also unfortunately unplugged before Martin Luther King Jr. Day. As each year passes, I become more and more convinced that what I need is not a better strategy or stubbornness or steadfastness or savvy. What I need is a Savior.

There is an old story about one of the shepherds who left his flock to run to Bethlehem to see the child Jesus wrapped in swaddling and laying in a manger. After the excitement of the angels singing hallelujah to God in the heavens over Bethlehem, and seeing the infant Savior wrapped in swaddling, he glorified and praised God to all whom he met—for a time. But he wondered just what it all meant and how it gave him peace. Every year he observed a remembrance with his family of the night the angels came, he saw God's son, and heaven reached down to earth and left its indelible mark. They got together, once or twice even with the other shepherds, and celebrated and were filled with peace—for a while. They sometimes even exchanged presents and gifts to mark the occasion. But, devoid of any new sightings of angels, losing track of the infant Savior named Jesus, and not knowing exactly why they celebrated—the annual ritual began to lose some steam and it was eventually dropped. And for the shepherd, as he grew to become an old man, the memory of the entire event began to fade into oblivion.

Thirty years later, in the Spring of the year, the shepherd made the short trip from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. When they arrived in Jerusalem the city was abuzz with the story of the wonder-worker and teacher from Nazareth named Jesus who was put on trial and was going to be crucified by the Romans. "It couldn't be," thought the shepherd. The shepherd made his way to the hill on the northeast side of the city called Gologtha, where the Romans crucified criminals. On three crosses hung men struggling for breath. He was unsure which of the three was Jesus of Nazareth until he heard the crowd mocking him saying, "*He saved others let him save himself, if he is the Christ the Son of God, the chosen one.*" *Luke 23:35* And from that moment the shepherd watched Jesus intently, wondering

at what had become of Him. He came into this world with the celebration and praise of angels and now he was to exit it a criminal, wounded and pierced, crowned only with thorns. And the shepherd stood there for hours, watching the child now a man, slowly and deliberately as if the culmination of a timeless design, Jesus looked to heaven and said, "It is finished," and he breathed his last.

And in an instant, the Shepherd realized what he had missed these thirty years. The coming of the angels and the singing hallelujah and the babe in a manger were incomplete, because this Savior babe came not to be served but to serve, not to be free but to set free, not to punish the wicked but to be punished for the wicked, and that peace with God begins at the manger but ends at the cross.

So, do you, do I, have peace with God, peace which does not fade as soon as the Christmas

trees are cast out to the curb? *Romans 5* teaches us "*We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.*"

Tonight we celebrate our peace, our communion with God. Your presence at this table is not won through good works. It is not awarded for talent or ability or skill. This table is not especially for the wealthy or the powerful or the gifted. It is not even for the Presbyterians. Communion and peace with God is for all those who choose to stand by faith in the grace of Jesus Christ and to hope and rejoice in His glory.

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace."