

## **A Message of Love to Shepherds**

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020 Luke 2)

Lying at the opening of the pen is no doubt very uncomfortable. Sometimes the cold completely numbs them from top to toe. Sleep is hard to come by as they keep watch, on the look out for thieves or wild animals. Any would-be predator needs to get past these shepherds. And yet sometimes they can hardly keep their eyes open. Sheep minding is hard work and dangerous.

Shepherds are strong people. They have to be ready to deal with danger all the time. Their work is by definition at night, the day is spent finding good pasture for the sheep to graze on. They have to live out here with the sheep, how else can the sheep be kept safe.

Shepherds are also the lower working class, despised by others. The job is low paid and doesn't come with land or lodgings or status. If they had family, they were separated from them, at least whilst they were working. Their work makes them physically and spiritually unclean and probably smelly!

I wonder what they thought about their life? Was it monotonous, the same thing day in and day out? What did they think about in the quiet moments? Were these the same hills where their ancestor King David kept his sheep?

Finally settled for the night, suddenly their quiet is shattered. I don't imagine they easily jumped at shadows. A deafening noise. Singing at the tops of their voices, saying they only have good news to share. Talking about peace. A blinding light, waking up all and sundry.

Scared out of their minds. Worried they'd all be ruined. Terrified, except the messengers keep telling them not to be afraid. Hallucinating, too little sleep having an effect, or maybe one too many drinks earlier in the evening.

This vision can't be ignored, even the sheep are startled! Eventually they raised their heads and looked around. Their peace has been replaced by a moment of glory, of revelation, of joy, of heaven. Once the message has been delivered, the messengers are gone.

Is it cynicism that sends those shepherds on a quick run to the stable? They need to check out the veracity of the message, so they take off as quick as they can, following the signs and directions of the messengers. They grab some little lambs to take with them – the best way to protect them.

This experience changes them. The story of the angels checks out. They enter the stable, they find the family and the baby just as the messengers had said. Whatever was seen or said in that stable changes them. They return home changed, as do many after an encounter with God. They return back to the fields, to their job but with lives forever changed. They go back almost floating on air, excited, amazed, telling everyone they meet what had happened. Singing and dancing, hearts brimming with joy. What did others think? Have these shepherds gone mad or are the people intrigued and want to hear the story? They have seen, and now they must tell of the love of God they have experienced.

Being told they are objects of God's favour must have been amazing, they had probably only ever received scorn before.

The stable full of animals would have been a familiar place for them, they would have known the sights and sounds of a shed full of animals.

How did they feel as they held the child in their strong arms, with hands softened by lanoline, the child who is the Prince of Peace and the Lamb of God.

They leave that shed changed forever.

The shepherds in the Christmas story symbolise the outsiders, the unclean, the nobodies. Like others in the story. they are surprised by the messengers of God. Frightened, they too receive words of peace – don't be afraid.

The coming of Jesus, just liked we learnt from Mary's story is good news to the outsider, those on the margins of economic, social and political life.

God's concern for those on the margins is revealed in many places and ways in the Christmas story, none more so in than in the story of the shepherds.

The shepherds now know themselves to be loved. God is revealing the message of love for the world, first to the rough and unsophisticated men from out in the fields on the outskirts of town. Jesus first revealed to those on the margins. Ironically this child Jesus, will spend most of his life either on the margins of society or caring for and associating with those on the margins.

May this Christmas be a time when you too experience and reflect on the way in which God has loved the world and you by entering into human history.

May you know this Christmas the song of the angels bringing good news, may you share in the excitement of the shepherds. May you too be changed by the encounter with the Christ child.

Go out into this week and keep watch for messengers bringing God's message of love and peace.

#### References:

'Advent Journey's' by John Gugel p.19-22

'Pauses for Advent' by Trevor Hudson p. 23-4 & 63-4

'On the Way to Bethlehem' by Hilary McDowell p. 73-4

'Hurry Up and Wait' by Arden Mead p. 28

'Christmas by Candlelight' by David Thomson p. 52-55