

## **Shepherds Surprised by Joy**

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021 – Luke 2)

Mary and Joseph make their way to Bethlehem to be counted, eventually they find a place to stay and rest, the best they could find, a shed out the back, out of the way, amidst the animals.

Meanwhile, out in the hills the shepherds are looking after their sheep.

Strong men, not accustomed to fear. They were used to ensuring wild animals stayed away from their sheep. They were always on the lookout for would be thieves come to take some of the flock. I imagine they lived by their wits and simply had a quick wash each day in the river or waterhole. If they had family they would live in the town, so they would be out there with only each other and the sheep for company. I guess they sat around a fire at night, warming themselves and swapping stories and maybe sharing a drink or two. Rough around the edges, not sleeping properly as they kept an eye and ear out for any strange sounds or goings on.

So, they probably were settling in for the night. When there is light all around, strange sounds. No chance of sleeping, it had been abruptly interrupted. Not the normal kind of disturbance – no wild animals growling on the prowl. No thieves trying to steal the prize ram or some ewes. The sky was ablaze, these strong fearless men shaking in their boots – they had never seen anything like it.

An angel, a messenger from God appears, just like had happened with Mary. As is often the case with God's messengers the first words spoken are – don't be afraid. Really!

The angel then gives them a message, good news. That a child has been born, a child who is to be their long awaited Messiah. Were these men God-fearing? No doubt they there Jewish and like their fellow citizens were awaiting the promised Messiah, the promised Saviour, the promised Liberator. They were given a sign and encouragement to go down the hills to the little town called Bethlehem and they would find him lying in a manger.

And if it couldn't get more frightening and amazing there was not just one messenger but many, all singing praises to God. And then as quickly as it started it finished.

Did those shepherds sit up and rub their eyes and wonder if it all had been some crazy kind of dream? What did they make of it? All we know is that they quickly made their way down the hills to the town. They must have made sure the sheep were secure and perhaps took the younger lambs with them to keep them safe.

So, they make haste to check out the message, to make sure it wasn't 'fake news'. Were they excited as they ran those hills? Were they scared? Did they take anything with them or just take off? Did they worry about the sheep and what might happen to them while they were gone? Did they worry about the future and even if they would have a job to return to, given they had taken off without thinking.

Did they go straight to a stable, did they think about what kind of place would house a manger and a new born baby? Did they ask around? However, they got there, they found themselves in a familiar place, a place out the back, a place away from the 'top

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end of town', a place full of animals and straw. Familiar smells and sounds, a place they could feel comfortable in.

And as the messengers had said, there was a little wrinkly new born, wrapped in cloth with his parents looking at him lovingly.

Did their fear dissipate as they looked at the child? Did they see in this child all the hopes of their people? Did they know in that instant, that God has always loved the world? Could they believe that they were the first to witness this great act of love? They, just a few ragged shepherds, had been entrusted with knowledge of the greatest gift of God.

The only response is one of pure unadulterated joy. Back they go to the sheep but they can't keep their experience secret, they tell everyone they meet of the great gift of God.

The shepherds who lived on the margins of society, go down to the margins of the town at the foot of the hills and find a baby just as they were told, born out of the way in a stable not even a proper house. And their response is joy.

God chooses to make himself known out the back, amongst the animals, with the marginalised, with simple shepherds as first witnesses.

May we have the same joy as the shepherds

This Christmas as we reflect on the Christmas story again, may we too

- Be surprised by the good news
- Have the simple belief of the shepherds
- Celebrate like the shepherds
- Rejoice that – God comes as a child, comes to those on the margins, comes without great fanfare, comes to remind us of his love for all the world. Amen.