

Dec 11th 2011 "and there were shepherds" Luke 2:8-20

Every week prior to the service Serena puts up on the screen several slides about the happenings here at CBC, including one that mentions the title of the sermon. Two weeks ago I chuckled when I saw the one about the wise men which included this cartoon.



Now that definitely couldn't be said about the shepherds—for they didn't have to ask for directions because they were given them in great detail by the angel of the Lord. Luke 2:10-12

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

It is obvious that Almighty God wanted these shepherds to be the first to hear the news and the first to see the baby. That's why he mentions the town of David—so that they would not go to any other place but Bethlehem. He mentions a manger, so that they would know that they must look for a place where animals were kept. And he depicts for them a new born baby through the mention of the swaddling cloths, so that there would be no doubt in their minds that the one they found was He.

Yet what we mustn't miss is that nowhere does the Angel tell those shepherds to go and seek the baby. The presumption is rightly made that after experiencing such a powerful demonstration of God's glory, and after hearing the proclamation of such good news, they would instinctively want to go and check it out. Go and see this thing that the Lord had told them about. And the Lord has already made sure that they would have all the directions they need to follow, to find the new born Saviour of the world.

And there is a sense that over the centuries nothing has changed. When a person is so touched by the Holy Spirit that they want to discover who Jesus truly is and

what He has to offer them, then they already have all the directions they need to find Him in the Bible and the witness of His church.

But by far the most amazing truth that emerges from God wanting the shepherds to be the first to hear the news and to visit the Christ-child, is found in the simple fact that they were **shepherds**. And in that Society shepherds were on the bottom rung of the ladder.

You became a shepherd only if you weren't smart enough or fortunate enough to become anything else. If the priests were seen as the A-graders then the Shepherds were sore pressed to make the Z-graders.

They smelt from constant contact with sheep. The oil from the fleece permeated their clothing and they walked constantly amongst the dung that their beasts left everywhere. In a society that had rules and laws relating to cleanliness they stood out as the ones who were never clean. They were not welcomed at places of worship and consequently were considered as irreligious and sinful. Justly or unjustly, it was also said of shepherds that they were less than honest and as a group could not be trusted.

Shepherds were the lowest of the low—even these ones on the hills of Bethlehem who looked after the Temple sheep. They were responsible for the purity of the lambs sacrificed in the Temple at Jerusalem, but that did nothing to lift their status. They were uncouth shepherds, despised and ostracized, yet God sent His angel first to Shepherds.

That's why I like to link the Shepherds with that passage from 1 Corinthians 1:27-29

27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him.

This morning you may be sitting here in this place and feeling just like one of those shepherds. Rejected by others. On your own. Despised. Worthless. Near the bottom of the social ladder. Or maybe you are not feeling that way but you know of someone who is.

In this passage of Scripture God reminds us that His ways are not our ways. That He does not look on the outer covering but on the heart. That His love is so great and misses no one. And that He values the down trodden and the failures and society's rejects so greatly, that He reaches out to lift them up first and foremost.

But also in this story the shepherds give us a great example of how we should respond to God when He reaches out to us and touches our hearts.

For there is no doubt that God revealed His power to those Shepherds that night and spoke deeply to them, and they never forgot that encounter. Luke 2:9 says:-

⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

That was the same glory that appeared to Moses in the burning bush, filled the Temple in Isaiah's vision, and completely covered the tabernacle in the wilderness when God was present. It would have been a totally awesome sight for those shepherds and they were **AFFECTED** by it.

And though we will never experience what those shepherds did while we live on this earth, the vast majority of us have felt the touch of God on our lives. We can remember times when the presence of God was so close and His voice so clear and we too were AFFECTED by that. God showed us His love for us and in His majesty He drew us to Himself. And whether we responded to that or not we were AFFECTED by it and will never forget that time.

(When I was a Pastor at the Cranbrook church I was also a member of the local APEX group in town. And in that group was a young fellow who worked at the local bank. He was the typical bachelor guy whose drinking and bad language were equally excessive. Yet one day he shared with me that in his teens he had once been part of a church youth group and even attended a Baptist camp. And that on one occasion he was really moved spiritually and very nearly decided to make a commitment, but chose to walk away instead. Yet some years later he still spoke about that time with some passion. He had been AFFECTED by his contact with Almighty God. Unfortunately right up to that time, and even then, he was not prepared to do anything about it)

Regarding the Shepherds however, they were not just AFFECTED by the message from God they also responded to it by making themselves AVAILABLE. Without hesitation they left their flocks and went seeking the child, in order that they could pay homage to the baby who was their Saviour, Messiah, and Lord.

And that's the response God wants from us. To be available to Him. Available to receive His forgiveness so that we can be cleansed of all wrongs. Available to receive His love, His care, His Grace
Available to be filled in an ever increasing way by His Spirit
Available for him to change and renew us daily

Available for Him to use us, to touch the lives of others.

That I find is the most precious thing about the Shepherd's AVAILABILITY, and I reckon that it caused God the greatest delight. That they were not simply available to see Jesus and to bless themselves, but they were also available to go and share their news and their joy with others. V17 says:-

¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

If we can say today that we have been affected by the call of Christ upon our lives, then can we also truly say that we are available to Him in the ways that he most wants us to be.

(I took advantage of Don's book stall last Sunday to purchase this book, "In Japan the Crickets Cry" which tells the story of Steve Metcalf, a missionary to Japan. Not long after his conversion he was at a Christian meeting where he felt challenged by God not to just be affected By the Gospel message as the way of salvation for himself, but to be completely available to God.

Prior to then he, as a young Christian was sure that he was doing enough for God, but his heart was stirred by the speaker who asked the question "How will you use those extra four hours?"

It seems that Australia had just changed from a 48 hour working week to a 44 hour one, and the speaker asked:--"Who will give them to God? Who will devote those four hours to serving God and not fill them with their own concerns and pleasures?"

Let me read to you Steve's response: (From "In Japan the Crickets Cry" p73)

It's that same challenge that I would like you to take away from the story of the shepherds. **The challenge of AVAILABILITY.**

As we move towards the Christmas break we also move to a time of the year when we have a little more time on our hands than usual. How will you use that time? Are you prepared to give a portion of it to God, even as Steve gave his four hours? To give in faith with no idea of how God will use your time and you, but in the knowledge that He will not waste what you offer. And like the Shepherds you too will be amazed and full of joy at what the Saviour will do through you.