

Walking With The Characters Of Christmas
“The Shepherds: Hope For Ones Farthest Away”
(Part 4)

Intro: I have never ceased being amazed at God’s power to change a life...especially those I may consider unlikely candidates. Story of Mike Sweeney and me in the gym.

- A number of years ago I was in the gym working out and I met this guy named Mike. I was a bit intimidated by this guy. He was big / rough looking / tattoos all over / his language...was a bit rough...we just started talking every day. Eventually, he discovered that I was a Pastor. I was convinced this would kill further conversation because I was convinced this guy certainly wanted nothing to do with God...BUT I was wrong.....
- There is so much hope for those that seem far away from God. The characters of the Christmas story give us a great example of this with the Shepherds.

The Shepherds are my favorite characters of the Christmas story. WHY? Because, here is God giving hope to the lowest group in the social order of the day. They are the ones considered farthest from God. They are the “rednecks” of the Christmas story. They’re the ones nobody cared about. If there is hope for these guys, then there is hope for all of us!

- Summarize Luke 2:8-20 (Shepherds watching their flocks at night near Bethlehem...
 - *One month before Passover, huge flocks of sheep would gather outside of Bethlehem – These were 1 year old lambs belonging to the high priest used for sacrifices in Jerusalem 6 miles away.
 - *These flocks required a large number of shepherds. (This is probably the setting)
- This story about the Shepherds gives us three foundational truths that we can cling to today. Three truths that give us great hope about our relationship with God.

I. No One Is Too Far Away for God

Luke 2:8-11 “That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!” (NLT)

A. The Shepherds were considered not worthy for God

1. Understand shepherds in 1st Century culture. Shepherds were ceremonially unclean – always (manure and dead animals) – They were excluded from temple worship.
2. Although they provided animals to be used in the temple worship, they were excluded from it. There were rituals they could do that would make them acceptable for worship, but this would require them to leave the sheep...which they couldn’t do.

3. At the time of Christ, worship was associated with the temple. Therefore, if you couldn't go to the temple you couldn't really worship God. So the shepherds lived in this spiritual dilemma.
4. You can see how they were looked down on in the culture. Always unclean / never worshipping in the temple / cut off from the presence of God / They were the group always on the outside looking in.
5. Even their appearance probably looked a bit rough. Shepherds lived with the sheep – slept among them – slept out in the open air – They looked and smelled rough.
6. So you can see why culture considered shepherds not worthy of God. BUT, what is so great about the Christmas story is although culture considered them unworthy, God chose these lowly shepherds to be the first ones to know about His Son!
 - God didn't choose the elite...He chose shepherds! No one is too far from God!

B. Many people today consider themselves not worthy for God (too far from Him)

1. Many people look at themselves like I'm sure, shepherds looked at themselves. "I'm not fit for God" All the wrong things I have done in my life has made it impossible for God to ever want me.
2. I've invited plenty of people to church over the years and some have said; "You don't want me coming. If I'd walk in there the roof would cave in on me...OR, "God would probably ZAP me."
3. All these comments indicate a belief that I've gone too far – I've done too much –It's too late – There's no hope. God wants nothing to do with me. This is entirely not true!
4. The truth is that God loves us even while we have no intention of following Him.

Rom. 5:8 "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (NLT)

5. Jesus coming as a baby was a demonstration of God's love so that He could die on a cross for our sin. What makes us acceptable to God is not our behavior, but accepting forgiveness through Jesus.
6. The angels showing up to the shepherds is proof that no one is too far away from God. No one has traveled too far – done too much – no one is beyond the realm of God's great love.

Jer. 31:3 "Long ago the LORD said,.. "I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself." (NLT)

7. Your past is irrelevant! If you want to know how God feels about you today, there it is! He loves you with an everlasting love. You haven't gone too far!

II. All Are Invited To Come and Experience Him

Luke 2:12-14 "And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger. Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the

armies of heaven—praising God and saying, “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.” (NLT)

A. The Shepherds were given an invitation to go and see for themselves

1. The shepherds could have just stayed where they were...but they didn't. They went into the city on a search for the baby Messiah.
2. Can we try to imagine what this looked like? We don't know how many shepherds there were, but the group could have been quite large. It may have appeared rather scary (A bunch of guys who just came in from watching sheep for who knows how long?)
3. Here this mob is going from stable to stable looking for an infant just born. Many stables in those days were caves that were common in the area.
4. Can you imagine what Mary and Joseph thought when they barged in? God didn't tell Mary a bunch of dirty, smelly shepherds were coming to see her son. (Shock / fear / wonder / amazement)
5. I love the obedience of the Shepherds. They didn't form a committee to discuss the significance of the angels announcement. They simply said, “Let's go and see!”

B. This invitation is still given to us today

1. We have the same invitation the shepherds had. We can remain where we're at, or Take Jesus up on His invitation. It's not an invitation about religion. It's an invitation about coming to Him for relationship. (Go see for yourself!)
2. Jesus was constantly giving invitations to people during His life. The invitation was always relational. Jesus didn't tell people to go to the temple. He told them to come to Him.

Matt. 11:28-29 “Then Jesus said, “Come to Me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you. Let Me teach you... and you will find rest for your souls.” (NLT)

3. Many people confuse the invitation. They pursue religion and religious activity instead of the relationship Jesus offers. Religion will never satisfy. Religion will never give us the Life we long for. Jesus said this to the religious people of the day.

John 5:39-41 “You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life.” (NLT)

4. What are you searching in to give you life? Some people look to religion / others look to something else – Career / money and possessions / new relationship / pleasure / a new thrill /
5. It has never ceased to amaze me why there is such a resistance at taking Jesus up on His offer? Why the obvious is so hard to accept? Why it is so difficult to be like the Shepherds and simply say; “let's go and see for ourselves.”
6. We've all been given the same invitation. It doesn't matter what we've done or where we've been or how far away we think we are. We are all invited to come and experience Him...experience a tangible relationship with Jesus. We are all invited to go see for ourselves.

- So, what if I take Jesus up on this invitation?

III. Jesus Changes Everyone Who Comes

Luke 2:15-20 “When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about. They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished...The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

A. The Shepherds were changed men because they experienced Jesus

1. Sometimes we overlook the non-typical shepherd behavior in this story. After their encounter with the baby Jesus, these guys acted in a way that not very typical for Shepherds. They were changed!
2. The Shepherds telling everyone what happened. Here these guys have no fear telling everyone in Bethlehem about seeing and hearing angels and seeing the Messiah.
 - The story says, “All were astonished” hearing the story. Shepherds don’t have encounters with God remember – they are unclean!
 - Shepherds aren’t known for their spirituality, yet here they are talking about God and the Messiah. Yes, everyone is pretty astonished.
3. The Shepherds glorifying and praising God for all they heard and seen. Here they are worshipping God and they are not in a temple. They may have not been acceptable in the temple but they knew they were acceptable to God...and they would never be the same because of it.

B. We become changed people when we experience Jesus

1. We’ve all had experiences that have changed us in some way. Marriage / having children / trauma – physical or emotional / Even relational experiences – I am a different person because of my relationships.
2. When we experience a relationship with Jesus, we are changed people as well.

II Cor. 5:17 “This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” (NLT)

3. How does that work? I’m not sure anyone can adequately explain what God does, but we do know this: there is a removal of something old and it is replaced with something new. The past is forgiven and removed and a new journey begins!
4. This relationship changes us forever. I couldn’t be a pastor if I didn’t believe this and get to see this with my own eyes. It is this fact that keeps me in the ministry. I believe in the power of God to change anyone.
5. No one is beyond the reaches of God’s love / grace and His forgiveness. No one has gone too far away for God. No one is beyond His forgiveness. In fact, God’s forgiveness is bigger than any sin.

6. This is why the Shepherds are just a great example to give hope to those who are the farthest away from God. You may feel like you're "unclean" and unacceptable for God. If you're struggling trying to wrap your mind around God loving you, I want you to listen to someone today...someone who has a story about being far away.

Testimony:

There's hope for those who seem far away. If you feel this way...or maybe you feel this way about people in your life...there's hope.

1. No one is too far away for God
2. All are invited to come (see for yourself)
3. All who come are changed – God can change anyone!

Prayer: Maybe you need to take Jesus up on His invitation today.
Maybe some of you need to keep praying for someone you've given up on.