

Exegetical Notes, Luke 2:8-20
“Keeping Watch”

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Luke 2:8-20

Verse 8

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

- These events happened near Bethlehem, as that is where Mary and Joseph were when Jesus was born.
- Shepherds usually only kept their sheep in the fields during the summer or the dry season. However, the Temple flocks, the sheep sold in the Temple as sacrifices, were kept in the open fields around Bethlehem throughout the year.
- Shepherds watched their flocks when they were out in the fields to protect them from thieves and natural predators.
- Thus, none of the information given in this verse is extraordinary.

Verse 9

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

- Throughout the Christmas story angels are sent from God to various people and, in this case, groups of people to proclaim the Messiah's birth. In some cases the angel is specifically identified as Gabriel. In this case, the angel is unnamed.
- Initial reaction to the appearance of the angel(s) is always the same. The people who see them are afraid. In this case, the fear of the shepherds is magnified. They are not just afraid. They are terrified. Apparently this is a normal reaction to the sight of an angel.

Verse 10

But the angel said unto them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.”

- Reassurance is always the first act of an angel to those his appearance has startled.
- In this case, the shepherds do not need to be afraid because the angel has been sent with good news that will bring them great joy.
- This news and the subsequent joy are not for the shepherds alone. They are for “all people.” This is stated without restriction. Thus the message and the joy it brings are for the Jews, God’s chosen people, and all others without regard to race, nationality, or sex.

Verse 11

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

- The “town of David” is Bethlehem. According to the rabbis. Bethlehem was the place in which the Messiah would be born.
- The titles used, “Savior” and “Christ,” are Messianic titles. “Christ” means “anointed one” and is the Greek word which means Messiah. Messiah is the Hebrew word that means “anointed one.” Thus the announcement to the shepherds by the angels proclaims the Messiah’s birth.

Verse 12

“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

- Twice, verse 11 and 12, this message is made personal to the shepherds with the words, “to you.” This personalization is important because shepherds were considered ritually unclean, particularly when they were out in the fields. Because they were out in the fields and away from home they could not keep the “Traditions of the Elders” related to ceremonial washing, etc. Subsequently, religious people shunned them. However, God did not. He sent angels to them to proclaim the Messiah’s birth, to show that the Messiah was sent to all people, not just to the rich and the good.
- In this case, they are told how they can test this pronouncement to know that it is true. They will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths. This was not unusual at that time. All babies were so wrapped. But this one would be lying in a manger, a feed trough. That would certainly be unusual.

Verse 13

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

- The word “suddenly” implies that this happened in an instant.
- Suddenly, many other angels joined the single angel who had been addressing the shepherds. These angels were worshiping God. They were praising God.

Verse 14

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

- This is an ancient hymn. It is entitled, “*Gloria in Excelsis Deo.*” It is set off in poetic meter in the text to tell us that it is poetry.
- The angels ascribe glory to God.
- “In the highest” does not refer to the glory of God but to the place of God’s abode.
- Peace is not simply the absence of war. It is the feeling of security that resides in the heart of one who knows and trusts the Messiah.
- Peace does not rest on all people. It only belongs to those that God favors. These are those who know the Messiah and believe/trust him. Without him, there is no peace and God’s favor is unknown.

Verse 15

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

- After completing their assignment, the angels left the shepherds. The angels returned to their place at the throne of God to await his bidding.
- The shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem to find the child about whom they had been told.

Verse 16

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

- Odd as it may seem, the sign confirmed the news. They found the baby lying in the manger!

Verse 17-18

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

- The shepherds were not quiet about what they had heard and seen concerning the birth of Jesus. Instead, they talked openly of these things.
- Those who heard the shepherds' story were "amazed" about the events the shepherds described and about the fact that these events included shepherds.

Verse 19

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

- On the other hand, Mary was quiet. Mary held all this in her mind and considered what it all meant.

Verse 20

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

- The shepherds returned to their flocks, but they glorified God because they had been part of the unfolding of the birth of Christ. They were never the same, because of their involvement in these events.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Keeping Watch*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)