

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Thank Goodness Looks Aren’t Everything!”**

Luke 2: 1 – 20

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2015

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

“I bring you good news!”

That was the story, of the very first Christmas... all those years ago. A bunch of anonymous, no-account, out-in-the-pasture shepherds; amid all the hardships, tragedies, and distractions of their lives and their world; *these* guys were given the gift of hearing some really **Good News**. The Messiah has come! God’s plan of salvation for His people is underway! The years and years that their ancestors had spent waiting and suffering and hoping and longing for just this night to come, had really all been worth it! God was with them... and He had their tired, troubled lives in His blessed and mighty hands!

“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people...”

You know, I suppose that most of us have heard these angelic words so many times, spoken by so many people, over so many Christmases, that it’s easy to just let them go in one ear, and out the other... and, in doing so, fail to understand just how momentous they all would have sounded to the ears of those poor, overworked shepherds. But, believe me... for *those* folks, freezing to death with the flocks that night, the news that that angel delivered could **not** have been better! And that’s because the world that those shepherds lived in was an uncertain, uncaring, unpredictable place... a place full of hardships, headaches, and hazards far too numerous to count.

You and I talk about living in a “dog-eat-dog” world... well, the shepherds had to worry about being eaten themselves, and I mean **really** eaten, by assorted lions and bears! They had to contend with poisonous snakes, and ruthless rustlers, and exposure to the elements, which, in an Israeli winter, really can be quite severe. Like us, they had to contend with budget struggles at home... as ancient Middle Eastern shepherds certainly didn’t qualify as living the “lifestyle of the rich and famous!” For most shepherds it was all they could do to just eke out a hand-to-mouth, subsistence kind of living.

Like every other Jew, they lived under the threat and oppression of the Roman Empire... and they languished in the indignity of having a foreign pagan power treating their country as if it were nothing but a worthless outpost. And if Roman disrespect wasn’t bad enough, shepherds were disrespected by their own people, too... being, as they often were, dirty, smelly, and absent from their responsibilities at home. Shepherds were personae non grata in the religious circles of the prim and proper, such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Since they worked ‘round the clock, they had no time to

observe Jewish ceremonial customs and purity laws... which meant that they would have been pitched out of the synagogue on their ear, if they'd ever had time to go there. And, on top of all this, like everyone else, their loved ones became ill... their friends died... they suffered personal disappointments... life frequently didn't go the way they wanted it to.

So, you see, the shepherds lived a difficult and dangerous life; and, although they sure needed it, from the looks of things they were the last people on earth who could have expected any good news, out in the field that day. But, on that first Christmas night, apparently looks weren't everything... because Luke tells us that, in spite of their difficult circumstances, when that angel appeared to them, those shepherds got just what they needed: a new lease on life! New hope! New assurance that, far from being outcasts in God's eyes, they were walking in God's very presence!

What the shepherds learned that night was that none of the trials and hardships of their lives had been able to separate them from the love of God! They discovered that the promise of forgiveness, and hope, and salvation wasn't going to be just for the wealthy, and the powerful, and the socially well-connected... it was going to be for *everybody!* Shepherds included! And that night, the whole wonderful plan got started... and they were the very first to hear about it! It's no wonder that the shepherds returned from their visit to Bethlehem glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen! What they had heard and seen was their own salvation... and the salvation of the whole wide world!

The crucial question which faces us on this Christmas Eve evening is... *can we still hear the good news that the shepherds heard so long ago?* Does the message of hope... of peace... of salvation and joy... which came into the shepherd's lives, come into our own lives, too? We who live in our own daunting, dangerous world... can we still hear the message of the angels tonight?

Well, we sure need to hear it... because we know in our heart that, for all its technological gadgetry and scientific enlightenment, our world presents us with every bit as many challenges and disappointments as the shepherd's world did, so many years ago. Our lions and bears and sheep rustlers may be of a different species today... but we know that they're all still out there, just waiting to take a big old bite out of us!

Maybe there's no oppressing army kicking down our doors in the middle of the night... but we're assailed by a whole host of fears and frustrations, doubts and despairs, which can render us stone deaf to the music of that heavenly choir, which assures us that our own salvation is also near at hand. Maybe, like the shepherds, we feel overworked and under-appreciated; maybe we've got more sheep to tend than we know how to handle; maybe we feel all alone in the middle of a field on a dark and dreary night; maybe we wonder if we really still matter in the eyes of our Heavenly Father.

We want to hear good news, but the TV set and the newspaper keep drowning it out with bad stuff: terrorists in Paris and San Bernardino; political nastiness for which even the schoolyard is too dignified; tornadoes in the Midwest; refugees and the threat of war everywhere else. We survey the landscape of our lives and we realize that the shepherds weren't the only ones who really needed to hear the message of the angels.

We need to hear it, too. *And the proclamation of the gospel that comes to us tonight is that we **can** hear it! And we **do** hear it!*

Contrary to the way things may look in our lives and in our world, the message which came to the shepherds was a message which, according to the angel, is for **all** people... people in first century Palestine, and people in twenty-first century Southampton, New York. People who tended livestock out in the field... and people who work in factories and offices, in classrooms and hospitals, in shops, and markets, and homes. The glory of Christmas is that the message which came to the shepherds by night is a message intended for everybody... **and that means you and me!**

And it tells us that no amount of bad news; no amount of tragedy; no amount of heartache and bad reports from the doctor, can undo the good that God intends to do us. We live every day, in good times and in bad, in the hands of a loving and merciful Lord. And that's never going to change. Ever.

Tonight, we've been taken once more to the side of the manger... and we've been given another chance to look in over the side, and see the Christ child with our own eyes, and to welcome Him into our own hearts. And we have been reminded once more that He has come to make His home with us... **not just tonight, but forever!**

May we, with the shepherds of so long ago, go forth from this place with praise in our hearts... and rejoicing on our lips. And may we know without a doubt that the shepherds' good news, is our good news, too! The angels are talking to **us** tonight! Can we hear it? I think we can! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!