

# 3rd Sunday of Advent

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] We'll pray for a moment. This is the third Sunday in Advent. And today we come to what for us is the third announcement of the birth of Jesus.

I wasn't quite sure of where we were going to go over these weeks, but the last two Sundays we were looking at two separate announcements of the birth of Christ. In the first week we looked at Luke chapter 1, as the story of the announcement of the birth of Christ is given to Mary.

And then we were last week in Matthew chapter 1, and we thought about the same story, the same news, as it was communicated to Joseph. And in the section that we're in today, Luke chapter 2, again we're considering the same news.

It's the announcement of the birth of Christ. But the difference here is that the announcement of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds is not prior to the birth, but after the birth.

And I wanted to look at the account that we have here in Luke's Gospel and consider it not from the perspective of Mary or Joseph, as we did the past two weeks, but consider it from the perspective of the shepherds.

[ 1 : 1 6 ] So what kind of message did God acquire to the shepherds on that day? And what kind of experience, what kind of encounter was this for them?

Three points. The first point is that this was a petrifying encounter for them. And the second point that we'll come to is there is a personal invitation extended to them.

And the third point is that there is the proof of faith in their lives, as we consider their response. So the petrifying encounter, the personal invitation, and the proof of faith in their lives.

So that's the big picture for what we're looking at today. So we come first of all to the petrifying encounter. And we'll just follow the text and step very simply through the text as we have it, starting at verse 8.

It says there, And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

[ 2 : 3 2 ] And they were terrified. And we hit pause for a moment. One of the dangers that we have today, and each time we come to these accounts, is we've read them so many times, and we have so much nostalgia wrapped up in the accounts of the Christmas story, that they sometimes lose impact, and they sometimes lose accuracy in our minds.

So we really have to get back to the text, and try and think about the there and then, before we come to the here and now. We tend to think about the Christmas story, on receiving it, as being a warm and fuzzy story, that brings a glow to your heart.

But the first time this story was told, to the shepherds, they were utterly terrified, as they received it.

So try to imagine it. And it shouldn't be too hard for us to imagine some of the details of this account. Try to imagine it. The shepherds are there.

They're out in the fields. In the thick, deep darkness of that evening. The loneliness. Just a few of them who have been charged to look after these flocks.

[ 4 : 02 ] The solitude of being apart from the community, and just out on the hill. They have the same routine, day after day, night after night.

They're grafters. Feeding the sheep. Tending the sheep. Keeping watch. Making sure that someone was always awake. So that no wild animal could come in, and attack the flock.

That was their life. That was their experience. That was what they came to know and expect, night after night after night. That's how it was, night after night. And then one night, God broke in to their lives.

God broke in, and his glory filled the skies. And the light that they would have experienced, dazzled them to the point that they had never seen a light like it before.

And these men, the mothers would avoid contact with, were directly contacted by the God of heaven and earth.

[ 5 : 17 ] The shepherds, I don't know what you think of the shepherds. I was reading a fair bit about the shepherds over the last few days. The orthodox, the churchy people, hated the shepherds.

Shepherds couldn't get to the temple. Shepherds couldn't wash their hands properly. They couldn't be purified. They couldn't go through all the ceremonial things that were expected. So they were constantly unclean.

The orthodox, churchy people, they kept the shepherds at a distance. No contact, please. Scurrilous, disreputable characters.

Not like the profters of today. And yet God determined that he would contact them, that group, these individuals, personally and powerfully.

And when he did, how did they respond? They were petrified. Absolutely petrified.

[ 6 : 25 ] And the fact is, an application here. This, very often, is our first experience.

When God breaks into our lives. And sometimes our hearts are so hard, and we are so closed in our minds, that God has to break in.

And it can be terrifying. Sometimes it can be through a supernatural encounter with God. He meets us in the night.

He meets us in a dream, because we will not pick up our Bibles. I know some even in this congregation. That's how God broke into their lives.

Through that kind of experience. It can be a vision. It can be an overwhelming sense of the presence of God.

[ 7 : 27 ] And it can be terrifying. Other times, the way that God will break into our lives is through a providence.

A series of events that we just would never have wished for. You know, we're getting on with our lives like the shepherds were. We have our routine.

We have our schedule. Life is steady. Life is comfortable. And then there's a phone call. Or there's a doctor's appointment.

Or you get called to come into the boss's office. Unexpectedly. And all of a sudden, the course of your life as you saw it, changes. It's an unexpected, it's an unwelcome providence.

And yet, God meets with you. And you encounter him. In it, in a way that you never did before. But probably most commonly, it's when we're reading the Bible.

[ 8 : 42 ] Or we're listening to a sermon like we have done a thousand times before. And a thousand times before, we've slept through it. We've planned our week in the midst of it. We've been disconnected.

And yet, one day, all of a sudden, we realize, and it takes our breath away, that God is speaking powerfully and personally into our lives.

As if there was no one else in the congregation. God is drawing near. And it can be terrifying. Remember Isaiah's encounter with God.

Turn with me to Isaiah 90, just for a moment. to do that, please.

Peace. Isaiah chapter 9 we know a lot of Isaiah we know him as a giant and in the faith we know him as one who would have walked closely with God, a holy man and yet he has this experience in Isaiah chapter 6 which is breathtaking let's go with him into this in the year that King Uzziah died Isaiah says I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted and the chain of his robe filled the temple above him were seraphs each with six wings with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet and with two they were flying and they were calling to one another holy, holy, holy is the Lord almighty the whole earth is full of his glory at the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke pause for a moment it's Isaiah's experience oh sorry

[ 11 : 14 ] Isaiah chapter 6 putting down the wrong reference here give you a second to get it verse 1 the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord seated on a throne high and exalted the chain of his robe filled the temple above him were seraphs each with six wings with two wings they covered their faces with two they covered their feet with two they were flying and they were calling to one another holy, holy, holy is the Lord almighty the whole earth is full of his glory at the sound of their voices the doorposts and the thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke this is what Isaiah is seeing this is the experience this is the vision that he's been given now how did he respond is it with a deep peaceful joy well the joy of the peace follows on but his response in verse 5 initially is to say woe is me woe is me

I cried I am ruined for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the king the Lord almighty that was Isaiah's encounter and he was petrified and the fact is when our eyes are opened to see God through whatever means that he has to use and often he uses a variety of means to coincide to deal with us and when our eyes are opened and when we begin to see God and when we begin to see ourselves in some measure as God sees us this is how we do respond we're petrified and we say with Isaiah woe is me with the shepherds we're terrified we come under conviction because the light of God's glory breaks into our hearts and our sin is exposed in a way we never knew it and we see how much we are in need of saving and that's who we come to next this personal invitation to be saved so there's the petrifying encounter and the second point here is there's the personal invitation now we talked a little bit about parties a few minutes ago with the children there are parties galore at this time of year sometimes you wonder am I supposed to go at this party or am I not supposed to go at this party there's an invitation but is it for me and that's the dilemma we're in sometimes when a generic invitation comes to us we're not really sure how welcome we'd be or if someone says you know you know where I live the home's always open you're very welcome you know if that's something that's said within the community there's a new house that opens anyone can come and see us you're not sure if you can because you're not sure you know is this personal enough to extend to me but if someone sends you an invitation that has your name on it and your address on it then that's much more persuasive or if someone comes to you directly doesn't put an advert in J at all but comes to you directly and says

I would like you to come and have dinner with me tonight then that's very persuasive that's very encouraging as something that we should respond positively to and that's what the shepherds had in this episode the news that's brought to them is personal there's a personal invitation extended to them the invitation to go to Jesus is personal so look at verse 10 with me back to Luke chapter 2 and just see the emphasis as I place it in these verses do not be afraid is the message that comes to the shepherds they're terrified petrified rightly so but the angel says there's good news coming do not be afraid I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people today in the time of David a saviour has been born to you he is

Christ the Lord now when you think about that and you really just chew the words over there it's a peculiar way to put it it's very personal if we hear about the announcement of our birth it's not in these terms we hear good news often that a baby has been born but the baby has been born to the mother and the father not to you or me and yet the shepherds are given this information here this invitation today in the town of David a saviour has been born not to Mary and Joseph but to you he is Christ the Lord he's the promised one the Christ the Messiah this will be a sign to you you will find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger and I just have this vision of the shepherds in the field just a few of them these hard men looking at each other and saying us did you hear what

I heard did you see what I saw is this for us I mean we're not the upper class we're the underclass we're not the religious types we haven't got clean hands we've got dirt under our fingers we haven't got we haven't got the qualifications we're not the type this kind of thing doesn't come to us would God really choose us and the answer consistently was and throughout scripture is yes James chapter 2 we're in it two weeks ago in the evening verse 5 listen my dear brother says James has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him shepherds were considered to be the poor people they were the poor ones they were the low class they were the marginalized they were the despised they were the hard living hard working men and that's who God elected in his providence to share the message with first that's who God called to trust him

[ 19 : 24 ] Jesus J.C. Ryle says this the busy labor of the hands need not prevent a man being favored with special communion with God Moses was keeping sheep Gideon was threshing wheat Elisha was plumber when they were severally honored by direct calls and revelations from God let us resist the suggestion of Satan says Ryle that religion is not for the working man I think this is a word for some of the men here the shepherds were drafters the shepherds were likely quiet reserved men not touchy feely types not heart on the sleeve types not openly spiritual characters the shepherds from what I can gather from reading about them were not unlike many a harassed man and yet

God chose them he came to them the shepherds would hardly have been able to believe that this invitation was coming personally to them and maybe that's the thought of some of you just here now do you think about the Christmas story again do you think about the gospel message maybe there are some here saying is this truly for me my wife yes that's fine but me what would my fellow men think what would the guys in the yard what would the guys on the floor say is this really for me maybe we're saying with Wesley and can it be that I should gain an interest in the saviour's blood died he for me who caused this pain for me who him to death pursued on the cross and the answer for the shepherds was yes for you men for you and if you're hearing this whether you're a man or a woman whether you're young or old whether you are considered to be a very good clean living person or whether you know that you have a whole lot of darkness in your heart if you're still hearing this then the gospel invitation is for you and if it seems unlikely that God would be to speak to you remember the shepherds the most unlikely of all the characters in that day poor rough bad men said the people and yet

God's personal invitation to come to Jesus to believe in Jesus to be saved from their sin to be saved into eternal life extended specifically personally and as far as them there's a personal invitation that they hear there is a petrifying encounter that they experienced and just before we come to the final point let's just see what happened here the shepherds they heard and in their hearts I think the shepherds believed and I'll tell you why in a moment so what happened next look at verse 13 suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God and saying glory to

God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests and that proclamation spoke about the glory of the Christ who was born but that chorus I think was perhaps a chorus that coincided with the faith that was imparted into the hearts of the shepherds I think at that point the shepherds repented I think at that point before they saw the child they believed and at that point of belief there is this heavenly chorus that erupts as we thought about with the children every time a sinner repents that same chorus sounds there is rejoicing

Luke 15 in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents to the shepherds they received and they responded to the personal invitation to come to Jesus have you responded yet to the personal invitation that you have heard to come to Jesus as that chorus sounded in respect of your life in respect of mine petrifying encounter personal invitation finally proof of faith these days we tend to think about faith as a very private matter we're almost indignant when somebody asks us about our faith as if it's an intrusive question faith is regarded by many people today as an internal affair something that's very private yet that's not the biblical position it's personal yes but we have no license to make our faith in Christ private if we have faith in Jesus that faith must be and that faith will be seen and it will be heard remember hearing a story about the

[ 26 : 47 ] Reverend William Still who I've told you about often he was in Aberdeen in Gilcompton South Church and one day he was asked to go and give a talk at the University of Edinburgh to the Christian Union and he was addressing a group a large group of young people many of whom were Christians most of whom were Christians and he was expounding that truth I understand that when we believe Christ he lives within us he lives within our hearts and he paused and he reinforced it and he said Christ lives within your hearts Christians but he is shouting let me out the point being that if he lives within our hearts he should be seen in our lives openly outward and he should be heard from our mouths the spirit of Christ lives within us if we are

Christians we have faith in Jesus there should be visible there should be audible proofs of faith and that's what we see in the shepherds their faith in Christ was seen in what they did you know there are many people and maybe there's some here today there's many people who have had amazing encounters with God maybe not to the degree the shepherds did but certainly awesome encounters with God who've heard his voice who felt his presence there are some who have benefited from the healing touch of God who have received his protection and other worldly comfort and in the moment they say wow that was awesome that was amazing that was just what I needed but you meet them in a week's time and life has just gone on they're back to doing exactly what they always did they're back to speaking as they always did their life looks no different there's no change and that's because they have no faith in

Christ they're not Christians they had an amazing experience but they're not Christians but that couldn't be said of the shepherds look at 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's happened which the Lord has told us about so they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger they had the experience they heard the word of God spoken and they trusted God's word and they obeyed God's word and they acted on God's word without delay they didn't say maybe next week or maybe next year they didn't say that was an interesting thing that a while and I may act on later in life it says without hesitation they hurried off to see

Jesus and as they did verse 20 tells us that they found that everything that they were told was in fact true they acted they went out in faith and they discovered having gone out in faith that what they believed was it was true and the point is simple the point to note is that there was a visible change in their lives as they trusted Jesus and there always is if our faith is not seen it's not true faith if we think we became Christians but our life looks no different and sound no different then we have to ask the questions James 2 26 where we were two weeks ago faith without works faith without deeds it's dead true faith will be seen true faith will involve you and I going to

Jesus as the shepherds did we go day by day in the word in prayer not because it's a routine it's because we want to meet with Jesus true faith involves us going to Jesus seeking his face listening to his voice calling out to him in prayer seeking to live in obedience to the word of God that speaks into our lives trust and obey we sing so often the two go together can't separate them and have Christian faith we trust Christ we won't always get it right but we will have that deep desire and determination and perseverance to obey him it will be seen in what we do and the proof of faith in the life of the shepherds was seen in what they did and finally just in a word it was heard in what they said now you only have to click on

[ 32 : 29 ] Facebook for two minutes to see this you know when we see something amazing whether it's a film or a great football match or a beautiful sunset or a cute dog or a cat doing a trick when we see something amazing we want to share it with people want them to share the experience with us and then we want to tell people about it we just can't be silent when we get good news if we truly value it and see it as good news we'll speak of it we'll share it and the shepherds they had seen the reality of sin in their lives as the light of God's glory shone in it terrified them rightly so but now as they saw Jesus the Savior as they trusted him they were overjoyed and that joy overflowed from within their hearts and it could be heard as they praised

God and it could be heard as they shared as they spread the word about Jesus can you imagine the conversations the shepherds the rough men speaking about Jesus and academia and the religious people saying who are you to speak to us we can imagine the shepherds beforehand thinking we can't speak we haven't got the qualifications we haven't got the reputation and yet such was the joy and the faith within them they couldn't be quiet they praised God they shared they spread the word about Jesus verse 17 to the end 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 they treasured up all these things and pondered them in their heart the shepherds returned glorifying and praising

God for all the things they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told so their faith in Jesus their saviour it was true living proven faith which could be seen and it could be heard so as we walk out the door this morning as we leave the shepherds perhaps for another year may they encourage us to put our faith in Jesus as our personal saviour and may they challenge us to show the world that we are worshipping that we are trusting Jesus through the things that we say and through the things that we do in the lives that we lead and we'll pray our heavenly father we thank you for this account of the good news of the gospel being shared with the shepherds we thank you for your love for us we thank you that you're a god who is gracious we thank you that you don't select those who are the creme de la creme of society and the elites

Help us, Lord, to see that even our best efforts are like filthy rags in comparison to the righteousness of Christ. So help us, Lord, we pray to trust in Christ and help us, we pray as we go from here, if we are believing, to speak much of Jesus, that the joy of the salvation that is given to us in Christ would be real within us and would spill out from within us.

That Jesus would be seen and heard in the way that we live, in the words that we speak, and even in the way that we praise in the last of our sins.

[ 38 : 19 ] May we sing from our hearts, may we sing with great joy and volume as we consider the Christ who is our King.

And we ask this in Jesus' name and for Jesus' sake. Amen.