

The Gospel According to the Shepherds

By Paris Reidhead*

Our Theme this morning, The Gospel According to the Shepherds. We read the Scripture. We have sung two hymns, not the usual carols, but hymns. We are remembering Him and worshipping Him. We have just been carried back again by solo ministry to Bethlehem. I trust that your heart has been asking God to make the meaning of the birth of our Lord fresh, real, new to you, and that you have asked Him to add new dimensions of significance to that which could be just another callously observed holiday season.

If we are to find meaning in the familiar, it requires that we view it from a fresh point of view. I have said that this morning I propose to speak to you this morning about the Gospel According to the Shepherds. Did they actually preach the Gospel? and, if so, what was it? You will recall that these were Jews, Jewish shepherds. You will recall that they were probably unlearned, illiterate. They had not read the Scriptures for themselves, and there were very few copies of the Scripture, but they also were most likely Pharisees, of the sect called the Pharisees, if not actually one whom we would identify as a Pharisee, which is most unlikely. Nevertheless, they would have been taught by the leaders of this sect.

You will also remember that the Pharisees taught all who came to them for ministry that Messiah was coming, (This was part of the testimony.) that He was coming to re-establish the kingdom of Israel, that it was His intention in coming to give Israel the glory that she had long lost, return that measure of glory that had been hers under David and Solomon. Furthermore, the Pharisees taught all who came to them for ministry that angels still visited men and their messages would be received preceding the coming of the Messiah, that when angels came, they should be revered, and their word should be obeyed. Furthermore, if these shepherds were, as I am asserting, of the sect of the Pharisees, they had been taught that sin could only be forgiven on the basis of blood atonement; the lambs that were in their flock were probably destined to be sacrificed on the altars of the Temple six miles away to the northeast in Jerusalem. Unquestionably as shepherds they remembered all that Israel had been taught concerning sacrifice. They would have been experts in their field, and if you had gone to one of these shepherds and asked, What is the purpose of these lambs?, one of them I am sure would have said, Well the best, the ones without spot, of my flock will be taken to Jerusalem for Temple sacrifice. And then if you had said just in this casual inquiry, Where did this sacrifice of lambs begin? When did God first establish it?, Without hesitation, I am sure this illiterate but well taught man would have said, Oh, back in Eden's Garden when Adam and Eve had sinned the Lord in the evening came and called them from the place where they hid from His gaze and scrutiny, and when He had brought out of them an acknowledgement of their guilt and sin, and when their hearts were broken in contrition, He made coats of skin. And then the shepherd would have turned and said, You see if He had made a coat of wool the lamb need not have died, but sir, since He made a coat of skin, the lamb must die. And this is the first place that blood was shed to cover man's guilt. And then he would tell you about Abel's lamb that lay upon the rock, its blood staining the granite. And then he would have said, with awe and wonders in his eyes, Cain's offering of vegetables and the fruit of his hands and the work of his garden God rejected, but the lamb, the lamb was consumed on the stone upon which it lay, for God was pleased with Abel's acknowledgement of his guilt and of his sin, and of his need of the innocent to die for him, the guilty.

And then you said, And where else did this lamb appear, and he would have said, When Noah came from the Ark, the first thing he did was to sacrifice a lamb. And then he would have told you of Abram's lamb, and finally would have told you of the lamb that was brought to the door of the Tabernacle, and over which his forefathers had placed their hand and confessed their sin, and he would have said, And as he stepped back and saw the smoke from the lamb that he nurtured from its day of birth rise upon the altar fire, he would have said, the innocent must die that the guilty live.

And so the shepherds were associated with sacrifice. They were associated with the sins of men that required sacrifice. And they, like their people, were concerned that all their sacrifices somehow failed to bring the peace they needed, and consequently thought they were honest workmen, and caring for the lambs that fed upon the grass in the wilderness, and in this winter season must be brought near to the city that they could be fed, they would have nevertheless have had within

them a deep consciousness of guilt, for they had lived their lifetime and used their work in preparing that which was to die in the place of the guilty. And so, here were a company of men, some callous, some sensitive, some stupid, some intelligent, but all of them living under the shadow of that immense building six miles away that they could probably see from the hilltop on a clear day, and which spoke to them of God's presence.

And so this night they are there, muttering, talking, some engaged in careless, frivolous pleasantries, and yet their mind carrying the deep current of their dissatisfaction and restlessness and lack of peace, when to their amazement they see the sky begin to shimmer, as though light were coming. And then the light grows more intense, until it seems as though the veil has burst, and heaven comes to surround them, and they did as all men do who know their hearts. They feared. And my friend, no one ever knows God until he knows his sin. No one ever knows his sin until he knows God. And thus it must be by revelation. Oh, they knew that they had broken Mosaic ritual and failed in its prescriptions, but fear, fear; this cutting, burning, searing, dividing fear can only come from the supernatural revelation of God to their heart. Everything was cleaved within them. Everything was divided within them. Everything was separated within them. The soul and the spirit was exposed, for now heavenly light has burst, and darkness is dispelled, and they feared. They were awakened from lethargy. They were stirred from indifference; the casual concern of a moment ago of a sense of unworthiness, now became an overwhelming revelation of guilt, for God was there. And this is the first thing that the shepherds would tell you, that you will never understand the babe that lies in the manger until somehow in the revelation of the holiness of God you fear. And this, I am sure, that so many there are that name the name of Christ and do half-hearted homage to Him at His birth, that understand so little of what it means, because they have never feared. They have never seen themselves. The light of His Word, the penetration of the Holy Ghost, the overwhelming, convicting work that our Lord said would be the ministry of the Spirit of God and the proof of His ministry is not there. I have gone into meetings large and small where people have been overwhelmed with sentiment. I have been in meetings where people have been aware of great emotional electricity, and they have said as they have come, Isn't God here. But my friend, as I read church history, and read the Bible, when God is present men hate sin, men fear God. And men are smitten. And when John Wesley¹ preached on the plains of England for there was no building that could hold the throngs that came, he would ride into town in the afternoon, announce that he was there, gather a few believers, and make it known that the next day at noontime he would be speaking on the greensward, and they would then come, not just a hundred, not two hundred, but 20 thousand, 25 thousand people would gather and stand for three hours without music, without singing, without advertising, without anything but a sense that God was in the community. And when he preached, as many as two to three thousand people dropped as though they had had an arrow through the heart, unconscious, and would lie there unconscious. What was it? It was the revelation of the holiness of God. It was the light of God that burst in upon the heart and produced the same physical results that the sight of blood will produce with many. You know there are those that, going into the place where they see blood, faint. Well now this was not just fainting, but this was the result of the revelation of the holiness of God bursting like the new sun in the dark night in their spirits. And the contrast between what they saw of God and saw of themselves was so overwhelming that the physical reaction was that of fainting. This did not just attend the ministry of John Wesley. It attended the ministry of his namesake, John Wesley Redfield², up in New Haven, Connecticut, for he met in the old Yale Bowl, the first of its kind that was there, and he preached to others, to thousands, and one occasion when they left there were some 13 hundred people, so reported the police in New Haven, that were utterly unable to leave because of the revelation of the holiness of God. John Wesley Redfield is little known, but they were so common there that the police were instructed when they saw someone lying on the sidewalk to smell his breath before they put him into the jail house, for it could be that he was afflicted with the Redfield disease. And the Redfield disease was the revelation of the holiness of God. For it was said, and it is still recorded, so we are told in the records of the police department, that those who were afflicted with this Redfield effect when they came to would be through with their drunkenness, their iniquity, their dishonesty, and would walk uprightly thereafter. So they were told to make sure. For they would be walking down the street, at the revelation of God's holiness. Now I am not a medical man, and I cannot explain what happened, but I know this that when our Lord Jesus

¹ John Wesley (1703-1791) Anglican cleric, Christian theologian, and founding the Methodist movement.

² John Wesley Redfield (1810-1863) Helped start the Free Methodist Church

Christ came over the path there as it is recorded in Matthew 9, and He looked out and saw the multitude, the sheep scattered, without a shepherd, there are medical terms in the Greek language used, that said, He almost fainted when His heart, divine eternal heart of the Son, in a mortal body, was moved with compassion.

Now, there is another moving. There is a moving that comes when God reveals to you what you are. And no one ever has heard the Gospel of the shepherds until they have seen themselves, exposed and naked, and bare in the light of the holiness of God. This is the first point of the Gospel of the shepherds.

And then the second thing that we find is this, that having been taught to fear, having been brought to the place where they had discovered their sin, and the guilt and danger that it involved, they realized that this was God come, not to judge, but to deliver, and so they heeded the Word. They listened and heard the angel say, "Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people" (Luk. 2:10). There was instruction that this fear was not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Such terror as I have described, such fear as we have set forth is not salvation, nor should it be so construed. It is but the first penetration of the scalpel of God's grace, cutting through the thick callous of our own indifference to our moral condition that enables us to see how desperate is our plight, and how hopeless is the cancer of sin that has consumed us. But it is not the end. And anyone that would simply say that anyone having feared has life would be to say that anyone that has been afraid of malignancy is cured of it, for this is but a preparation, not an end. And so it was, though, that they were disposed to listen, for having heard, and having faithfully observed all that they have known in the past, they found it in the presence of God not to be enough. They were disposed to listen. And as they listened, they learned that the visitors that came had certainly come to make them see their need, but not to leave them in despair because of it. And so the Gospel according to the Shepherds would be, Listen to the Word that is delivered from heaven. And I firmly believe that everyone that has had this first awakening, this first revelation of guilt is thereby predisposed or divinely disposed and inclined to listen.

There are those that will listen out of courtesy. Perhaps there are those to whom this season you would like to speak about the things of the Lord, and you will find it extremely difficult. May I tell you why? I think the reason lies in the fact that you are trying to give them a cure for a disease that they do not even know they have. And what you ought well do for your loved ones for whom your hearts are so burdened is to ask God to somehow so pierce through the callous sophistication of their minds and spirits, that they can see themselves. That person that listens and reads, and hears concerning treatment for cancer, and I use it as an illustration of sin, is not concerned about it at all until he has those pains that he has come to associate with it, and until the diagnosis is that he is infected and afflicted. Then he racks his mind, Who was it that said? What was it that I read? What did I hear? Where is...? And all of a sudden, the literature, the testimony, the information, the descriptions that meant so little to him have become of supreme importance because of his need. And so according to the Gospel of the Shepherds you are not really inclined to hear what God has to say until you have seen yourself, but when you do see your need then it is glad tidings of great joy.

I read in the letter of statement, We are hearing so much these days about the conquest of space while our civilization has forgotten that 1900 years and more ago God conquered space when God became flesh and dwelt among us. And so it is that the conquest of fear came with the conquest of space, and God clothed Himself with human personality and human nature, then it could be glad tidings of great joy where there is born a Savior. And so there is an inclination to listen to the good news only when there has been a revelation of the bad news. But good news is not enough.

Oh, how many there are that, hearing the plan of salvation, acquiesce to its simplicity, and to its promised deliverance, and still seated on the hillside of their own will and way, and rule of life, they say, Yes, the message of the angels is sweet to my ears, and the testimony of the Scripture is a delight to my mind. And the fact that Jesus Christ died so that I won't have to die is certainly good news indeed. But they remain there. But the testimony of the shepherds and the Gospel according to the shepherds, it is not enough to hear; You must also rise and go. And so if you let them give you the plan of salvation, their answer is, After you have seen God and seen yourself, and heard there is deliverance, it is not enough to sit there and to simply savor what you have heard. There must be a response. Let us arise and go. And I hear another who met the Lord Jesus Christ in such a revelation of His grace, and said, "Wherefore, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but I delivered to them of Damascus and Jerusalem, the Jews and the Gentiles, how that they must repent and bring forth works

meet for repentance” (Act. 26:19-20). And so it was that we see repentance here. For they had no intention of going into Jerusalem. They were seated with their flock. They had no intention of seeking the baby that had been announced. They were indifferent to Him. But now they have seen themselves and their need, and God in His holiness, and heard the message, and they are prepared to change the course of action. They are prepared to alter the life. They are prepared to adjust their plans, and they will bring forth works consistent with this. Let us arise and go.

And I hear someone sitting in his rebellion, that says, Oh, how wonderful it is that God has sent His Son to die for rebels; but they sit on the hillside of their own self-importance and continue to rule, and yet revel in the birth of a babe that has delivered them from the consequence of playing God. No. No. That is not what the shepherds tell us. When I see the one who sits in bitterness and strife, and says, Isn't it marvelous that Jesus Christ has died, has saved men, and that which produces these horrible things, and then they still sit there in bitterness. No. No. And this one who sits in debauchery and dishonesty, and immorality and drunkenness and says, I am trusting the Savior that died for the debauched and the drunken, and the immoral, and sits on the hillside and continues with it, has no part. There is no evidence of repentance. He said, “Repent and bring forth works meet for repentance” (Mat. 3:8). And what is this? This has been a complete change of direction, a complete change of intention, a complete change of purpose, and with it a consequent change of action. And so if you would ask the shepherds to give you the gospel they would say, It is not enough to see, it is not enough to feel it is not enough to hear, but you must do something about it. You have got to arise and go. You have got to arise and go.

But let's go with them just a little further. What is it now we hear? As we come and let the shepherds tell us, what do we find them doing? They follow the star, they follow the light, they go to the stable, and they see the mother and child. And there is something else. It does not say this. It says it of the kings, the magi. They worshipped Him. It does not say it of the shepherds. Well how do you know they did? Because I see the results of it. I see what happened, and because of what happened, I know what they did. I cannot say, They came in and pushed the sheep and cattle aside and came to the side of the little manger there and knelt and adored Him and worshipped Him. Well how do you know they did? Because of the results. Here it is. “And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for what they had seen and heard” (Luk. 2:20). And they had heard that that day in the city of David was born a Savior who was Christ the Lord, and the return glorifying and praising God was that as they came into the stable, faith leaped up in their hearts and the babe that was swaddling clothes was God come in the flesh, and they so saw Him, and they so received Him, and they so worshipped Him. And oh, how marvelous it is that God has laid the threshold of His grace so low that a wayfaring man though a fool need not err in finding Him. So low that the humblest...

I have heard men say, Oh, the way is so high. No it is not high. Listen to the gospel according to the shepherds. And they said, We got up from where we were, and went where we were told, and saw the One that was presented, and He was God, the Savior, Christ the Lord. We believed and we received Him as the Savior, Christ the Lord. And they look at you and say, That isn't hard. But you see there is only one way to receive Him. So many people would like to receive Him as the Savior, Jesus. But He cannot be received as Savior, Jesus. He can only be received as He is presented, as the Savior, Christ the Lord. “For unto us a child is born, and unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder” (Isa. 9:6). For the babe that lies in Bethlehem's manger is the “Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, and of the increase of His government there shall be no end.” There is only one way to receive Him: as Christ, the Lord, the Lord of shepherds and the Lord of scholars. For the wisest of men must come. As we hear a little later in His coming, and he testifies that he too had oft times done that which was contrary to the way, and to Jesus, and to his people, for he could not believe that Christ the Lord should be born of a virgin, and have shame attached to His birth, and be laid in a manger. But when he heard the voice from heaven say, “I am Jesus of Nazareth whom thou persecuteth,” he had to make his way right where the shepherds had come and worship and receive and adore the babe that was born in the stable and laid in a manger (Act. 9:5). And if you are here today and have life in Christ, it is because you came where the shepherds were and saw that that babe that was born and there laid was God come in the flesh. Have you so received Him?

And so the Gospel according to the shepherds is that all of God's delivering love, all of God's grace, and all of God's power is in a Babe, a Babe whom He has highly exalted and given a name above every name, but He must be received as He is presented, Christ the Lord; and then you know Him as a Savior. But it is not just to say He is Lord, and then to proceed in your own lordship, as though somehow acknowledging Him, and yet continuing to rule satisfies Him. He is not satisfied. He said, “He that

heareth My words and doeth them, he it is that loveth Me” (Joh. 14:21). And the evidence that you have heard the Gospel according to the Shepherds is that you have arisen to walk in His Word, and to walk in His way, and with this other one that came, today as the first day you knew Him, your only word is, Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do? But the Gospel according to the Shepherds is not only to receive Him as Christ the Lord and Savior, but there is something else to it.

And the shepherds returned. And if you had asked the shepherds for the Gospel, they would say, Oh, but you must confess with your mouth Jesus to be Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead. This is the Gospel according to the shepherds, for they returned. They returned to their homes and their villages. They returned to their life, and they said what they had seen, and testified to what they had heard, and witnessed to what they had experienced that Jesus Christ is God come in the flesh, and that the Savior who had been born as Christ was Lord. And they returned, glorifying and praising God. Why? For what He had done in showing them their sin? O yes. What He had done in stripping them of their self-righteousness? Yes. What He had done in saving them from their religiosity, for they were among the most religious of men? Yes. What did they glorify Him for, and praise Him for? Because He had caused them to fall on their faces, dead with fright and filled with fear because in the presence of God they were unworthy to stand? Yes. Yes. Yes. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Pro. 27:6).

And my heart, dear friend, today if you know life it is because you knew death. He only came to seek and to save that which was lost and, if the ministrations of His Spirit, the Truth of His Word, and the testimony of His love and the persuasion of those who preach are not enough to cause you to fear, you will never return glorifying and praising God.

I often wondered why some whom I thought I had led to Christ were so “cold fish” about it all. They just could take it for granted. Oh, I know now. They heard, but they had not seen, they had never seen God, they had never seen themselves, they had never heard Him speak, they had never come to receive Him. It was all just words like a pleasant tune, but the words were indistinct. The melody came, but the truth did not. And so there is nothing there. They had been. They saw a babe. They saw a manger. So and so. But what is this that is so world shaking? Just a babe in a manger. Oh, but you see.. So He is Christ the Lord. You see it makes all the difference in the world as to whether there has been a revelation of Christ. This is what happened to these. They came, they had seen themselves, they had listened to God’s Word, they had repented and broken, they had obeyed, they had received Christ as Savior and Lord, and something glorious had taken place within them. There was an inner confirmation, affirming the truth, there was an inner reality, there was a glorious experience of reality, they were not just testifying to what they saw on the hillside, what they saw in a stable. They were testifying to the work of God’s sovereign grace in their hearts, confirming to them the truth of what they had heard, and what they had seen. And so it is that many there are that have heard the Words and the doctrines, and agreed to them, and had tried to work up an excitement and an enthusiasm. But it is so difficult to do, because it is all so superficial. It is outside. But these men who returned, glorifying and praising God, were not just doing it.

You say, Well if I could have an experience with the heavens lighted, and an angel came...you’d doubt it before the week was out. That is what would happen to you. You would question it before a month was over unless it worked a change inwardly that would continue in glorious transforming reality; for what your ears hear, what your eyes see, soon is crowded out by other things that eyes see, and ears hear, but what you have experienced has become indelibly part of you, can’t be eradicated. It can’t be removed. It cannot be gainsaid. And that is why life is not in words, and life is not in doctrine, but life is in the Son, and he that hath the Son hath life. And they had received Him as He was presented, but somehow they had received such inner certainty, and such complete confidence that they could go back, glorifying and praising God.

And so it is with you. You say, Well I haven’t anything to say for Jesus. I find it so hard to speak. I just... I wonder, dear heart, how much is real. It is a question of what is real, how much is vital, what is genuine, what has happened. Have you heard the Gospel according to the shepherds? Has there been this inner revelation? He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness within himself. Oh let me bring all this into focus as I close.

“For in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son made of a woman, made under the Law, to redeem them that were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons, and since we are sons God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father” (Gal. 4:4-6). God’s purpose in sending His Son was not just to redeem us from the Law. It was

that. God's purpose of sending His Son was not just to place us in His family as sons, a legal adoption. It was that. But God's purpose in sending His Son was that He might make our hearts His home. Do you see? When Jesus Christ left heaven His goal was not a manger in Bethlehem. When Jesus Christ left heaven, it was not a refugee's home down there in Egypt. When He left heaven, it was not a carpenter's home to the rear of the shop up in Nazareth. When our Lord Jesus was sent in the fullness of time, made of a woman, made under the Law, it was not just to redeem us at Calvary. It was that. When our Lord Jesus was born that day it was not just to ascend into Heaven. He had been at the right hand of the Father from eternities past. Why did He have to make all this tour to get back there. That was not the end. When our Lord Jesus Christ came into the world, His goal, His destination was your heart. "For He said, I will dwell in them, and I will live in them, and "I will be a father unto them, and they shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (II Cor. 6:16, 18).

And thus this Christmas, we come and say, Has Christmas, the Gospel of the Shepherds been realized in your life? Is Christ in you the hope of glory? I think no better word could be left with this congregation that this, "Examine yourself, whether you be in the faith. Prove your own self. Know your own self how that Christ be in you except ye be reprobate" (II Cor. 13:5). And when Christ is in you then you have reason to glorify and praise God. Is He living in you? dwelling in you? This is His goal. This was His destination. And this is that which we with the shepherds would testify to that God has become flesh and dwelt among us, but, ah, more than that -- dwelt in us. Shall we bow in prayer.

The little children sing it, and sing it so well, We have tried to make it complicated. We have tried to make it difficult. But it is not. It has to be real. It has to be genuine, but it does not have to be difficult. Our Lord Jesus today is outside of another place. There was no room for Him in the Inn, but you know that is not nearly as troublesome to Him and to me, to you, as the fact that we can see Him today, 1900 years after that event, standing in the cold dew of the morning with these words from His lips, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (Rev. 3:21). Think of it. Patient, loving, gracious, King of the universe, ruler of all worlds, standing at the door of your heart. Behold, I stand at the door and knock, if any man will open the door I will come in. I won't send forgiveness. I'll bring it. I won't send pardon. I'll be it. I won't send life. I'm life. I will come in and sup with him and he with Me. The Little children sing it: "Into my heart, into my heart, come into my heart, Lord Jesus. Come in today. Come in to stay. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus."³ And you can go, glorifying, praising God, because of reality. Father of our Lord Jesus, in whose heart our salvation began, we pray today that the meaning of our Lord's invitation to the family of men, His incarnation may come afresh to us, and that He may see of the travail of His sorrow and the grief and the suffering of His soul, and be satisfied, because today, someone who is outside, whose heart He has been standing long and patiently, has seen the folly of having everything but Him, and with childlike faith and submission receiving love, unlatch the heart door, and invite Him in, May it be true, Father. And may those who can testify, Yes, this is what He has done, evidence the reality of their testimony by going and glorifying and praising God that Jesus Christ has made their hearts His home. Joy, peace, love and blessing, life, eternal life He brings. So seal to our hearts Thy truth and word this hour, for Jesus sake. Amen.

Let us stand for the Benediction. May the love of God the Father, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the communion and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost be and abide with all who know Him, but those who do not, our God, we choose for them and pray for them all that is needed to bring them to life in Christ. Amen.

* Reference such as: Delivered at The Gospel Tabernacle Church, New York City on Sunday Morning, December 24, 1961 by Paris W. Reidhead, Pastor.

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³ "Into my Heart" By Harry D. Clarke, 1924.