

**Series:** Characters of Christmas  
**Title:** Shepherds, Blessed of the Lord  
**Text:** Luke 2:8-20  
**Context:** Devotion during choir cantata.

Some time ago, ABC News aired the show, "*The Search for Jesus.*" Peter Jennings begins the broadcast by reading the Christmas story out of Luke. In the background, a Middle Eastern man was carving the face of Jesus into a block of wood. As the man finishes and sets the carving down, Jennings opens the show by highlighting the media's interest in Jesus. He says, "Hello, I'm Peter Jennings, and we have been searching for Jesus—as reporters, that is, because it's an irresistible story. And whatever your faith or religion, there's simply no denying the extraordinary influence that Jesus has had—that he does have—in people's lives."

We pick up this irresistible story on the night when God moved a ragtag collection of sheep herders. They would be the first to see the Savior of the world. God made only one invitation to come and visit Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus. That invitation went out to uneducated, smelly, low-class, social and religious outcasts.

No one would expect God to notice these rednecks. First of all, they were religious outcasts. According to Jewish religious law, they were unclean. Their jobs prevented them from participating in Jewish feasts and holy days. When everyone else was making the trip to Jerusalem to worship they were out in the fields, watching over the sheep. They were like a trucker or a shift worker, whose job keeps them from regularly attending church. It wasn't really their fault. Whatever might have been in their hearts, they weren't able to participate in church.

Not only that, but shepherds were borderline social outcasts. Since they were constantly on the move to find new pasture for their flocks, they were looked on with suspicion. Kind of the way people today might look at carnival workers. If something came up missing, it must have been those shepherds. Their word wasn't considered trustworthy. And they really didn't have much contact with other people. Most of the time, they were "*living out in the fields*" (v. 8). This was not a 40-hour a week job. They were with the sheep 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. During the day, they led the sheep to grass and water. They watched while the sheep grazed. They kept an eye out for predators like wolves. And at night, they actually slept in the sheep pen with the sheep to guard against theft and animal attack. Being a shepherd was lonely, wearisome, usually very boring and tedious, and sometimes extremely dangerous.

Now imagine you're God and you want to announce the most amazing, incredible, joyous news ever; an event which will literally change the course of history – the birth of your only Son, Jesus Christ. The Savior of the whole world has finally come. Who do you tell? Who do you invite to come and see? Shepherds? Many would expect an event like the birth of Christ to be announced to the most important people in the nation. Political leaders – kings, governors, magistrates, even Caesar – might be invited to come and pay homage to the future ruler. Religious leaders – Priests, rabbis, synagogue officials, the head of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin – they would all be invited to worship their Messiah. Military leaders, wealthy merchants, men and

women of distinction, the news media would be worthy of consideration. Not shepherds.

But God choose shepherds who were seeking acceptance, purpose and dare I say, “peace.” So, why did the Living God choose such a motley group of people? Why did He invite them to come and see the Savior? Why did He want them to first proclaim that the Savior had come? Were the shepherds especially pious, unusually holy? In spite of the fact they couldn’t participate in organized religion, were they just outstanding believers in God? It’s doubtful, although the passage does say that they believed what the angels said, and did what they told them to do. Yes, their lambs were offered as sacrifices in the temple. They knew what these sacrifices represented. But there’s nothing in the text to indicate that they were more religious than anyone else.

Were they perhaps looking for God to visit them? I doubt it. If I’m a shepherd, I’m probably convinced God has no idea who I am. If God does know who I am, he can’t think much of me. So why? I believe that God wanted to show that His love does not discriminate on the basis of class, or wealth, or social standing. He does not respect kings and princes more than hourly laborers. He does not value priests and pastors above the people in the pews. God has no favorites. His love is available to all on the same basis – faith in Jesus Christ, and faith alone.

The black sky exploded with brightness. Sheep that had been silent became a chorus of curiosity. One minute the shepherds were dead asleep, the next they were

rubbing their eyes and staring into the face of angels. One might suspect that the angels came at night because that is when light is best seen and most needed.

Aware of their fear, the angel comforted them by saying, *“Don’t be afraid, I have good news for you, which will make everyone happy. This very day in King David’s hometown a Savior was born for you. He is Christ the Lord. You will know who he is, because you will find him dressed in baby clothes and lying on a bed of hay.”*

It’s strange that God appeared to Zechariah, Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds who represents humble folks. He likes to use the ordinary because that makes His power and wisdom all the more evident. When He uses people who are obviously very gifted and powerful, then the results can be attributed to human effort and human talent. But if He uses people of obviously low to average abilities, then all the credit for the results go to Him. Many wouldn’t realize that the Son of God would carve his extraordinary face into such simple, ordinary lives. What about you? Would you allow God to carve his extraordinary love into your life?

In his book, The Wisdom of Tenderness, Brennan Manning tells the story of Edward Farrell. Ed took his two-week vacation to Ireland to celebrate his favorite uncle’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. On this morning, Ed and his uncle got up before dawn, dressed in silence, and went for a walk along the shores of a nearby lake. Just as the sun rose, his uncle turned and stared straight at the rising sun. Ed stood beside him for 20 minutes in a holy silence. Then his uncle began to skip along the shoreline with a radiant smile on his face. After catching up with him, Ed commented, “Uncle Seamus, you look very

happy. Do you want to tell my why?” “Yes, lad,” the old man said, tears washing down his face. “You see, the Father is fond of me. Ah, the Father is very fond of me.”

The shepherds went into Bethlehem and saw what the Lord had told them. How amazing that the shepherds who looked after the Temple lambs were the first to hear of and see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. These despised, often rejected shepherds must have had tears in their eyes as they gazed into the Son realizing the Father’s fondness. It didn’t matter that they had lost a night’s sleep. They had seen God in a new way. They realized God loved them. Yes, that is why the Father sent His Son, so that we too might know how much the Father is fond of us.

Those shepherds, like Uncle Seamus, could not contain their joy. They had to tell somebody. They had to worship. They met a chorus of angels in their pastures. Their wait for the Savior was over. Their hunger for peace was filled. They had to go and tell somebody.

What effect will this Good News have upon us? Will it be business as usual? Or as God’s love relieves our fears will we awaken the world with joyful song? Will we make Him our Lord? God wants to carve His face into our hearts. We can’t ignore him any longer. This is the best time to leave the dark night and enter into Bethlehem’s light.

**Prayer:** Father God, your greatness surrounds every part of the coming of your Son. Step by step, moment by moment, miracle by miracle, You planned it all. You showed the height and depth of Your fondness in the gift of your Son Jesus...and Jesus;

You are the image of your invisible Father, the firstborn over all creation. Lord Jesus,  
You are the bright and morning sun, the lamb of God who takes away our sin. And just  
as the Father showed His love, we offer our love, our hearts, our witness, and worship  
praising the matchless beauty of Your Name, the name that soars above every other  
name, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Amen. (1514)