

Witness

Second Sunday of Advent

Character Emphasis: Shepherds

Scripture Text: Luke 2:8-20

Lesson Synopsis: In the appearing of the angels to the shepherds, we see majesty being visited on the unworthy. This lesson will push students to consider how the Church is challenged by the divine celebration of the lowly in this passage. It will then move to examine the peace that is announced to the shepherds and to a consideration of their response. These lowly recipients of majesty become witnesses to the same. Students will be challenged to consider what qualifies them to join the shepherds in witness to the world.

Digging In

Shepherds

While it is commonplace to see shepherds gathered around the newborn Jesus in our living room nativity scenes, their presence is actually quite surprising. After all, we would think that important and powerful people should have received the first public announcement of Jesus' birth. Why not put on a light show at the temple or royal palace to proclaim the good news of a Savior? Isn't Jesus worth this kind of fanfare? Yet the glory and message and heavenly choir are reserved for shepherds in the Bethlehem back country. Majesty is being visited on the unworthy.

The backwardness of the proclamation is compounded by shepherds' reputation in society at this time. Not only were they lowly laborers, but they were also considered people of ill-repute. Considered dishonest due to the frequent grazing of their flocks on others' lands, shepherds were eventually added to a list of those ineligible to offer testimony in court.¹ What qualifies people such as these for a private visitation by the heavenly choir?

Right out of the gate, Luke is challenging our perceptions and turning the world upside down. This message is not meant only for the upper crust in society. In fact, God is so serious about this that societal elites aren't even invited! More than this, the message is not only for those of good reputation. The angel proclaims good news for *all* the people, and even shepherds will be included in this count. God's outlook, it seems, is different than our own. He does not privilege the powerful, nor does he overlook society's outcasts. Indeed, it is to the lowly and outcast that he sends the heavenly host.

In the shepherds, our valuations of the world are challenged by a divine leveling of the playing field.

The Peace of Christ

If Luke challenges us in his telling of the shepherds, he continues to do so in his report of the message they received. The former is a challenge to worldly perceptions, while the latter is a challenge to worldly power. Notice how the angels speak of Jesus and the role that is assigned to him in the heavenly visitation. The birth of Jesus is described as good news, he is named Savior, and a promise of peace accompanies him (2:10-14). Now read the following inscription from antiquity about Caesar Augustus, ruler of the Roman Empire:

Providence... has brought into the world Augustus and filled him with a hero's soul for the benefit of mankind. A *Savior* for us and our descendants, *he will make wars to cease* and order all things well. The epiphany of Caesar has brought to fulfillment past hopes and dreams.ⁱⁱ (Emphasis added)

Here we have the ruler of the great Roman Empire, which ruled over the known world during Jesus' lifetime, called both Savior and bringer of peace ("he will make wars to cease"). The same inscription speaks of Augustus' birthday as "the beginning for the world of the glad tidings [read here "good news"] that have come to men through him."ⁱⁱⁱ Adding all of this together, we find that many of the same appellations attributed to Jesus by the angel and heavenly host (good news, Savior, peace) were also ascribed to Caesar Augustus. Far from coincidence, this seems a purposeful attack on Caesar's power. As David Garland argues, "Luke's description of the birth of Jesus ... challenges imperial propaganda and proclaims that Jesus is the real Savior, the real Lord, and the real bearer of peace for the whole world."^{iv}

Of course, there is quite a contrast to be drawn between Caesar and Jesus. While Caesar dwells in the halls of power, Jesus lies in a feeding trough, lowly and humble. Jesus will continue to challenge notions of power throughout his ministry (Luke 22:24-30). Contrast can also be drawn between the kinds of peace that accompany Caesar and Jesus. Augustus was renowned for bringing peace to the world through military conquest. An altar was even built to honor him for this achievement.^v His was a military peace, though, for "Roman peace ... was an armed peace with the Roman foot planted squarely on the necks of vanquished foes."^{vi} The peace of Caesar, then, alludes to an absence of conflict brought about through military



The Ara Pacis (Altar of Augustan Peace) built to honor Caesar Augustus' achievement of peace through military might. Photo by Manfred Heyde.

intimidation.

The peace of Jesus, on the other hand, proves to be something else entirely. Drawn from the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, Jesus' peace refers to wholeness rather than only an absence of conflict. As Charles Talbert explains, "Such wholeness would characterize the basic relations of life: (a) the relation of persons and God, (b) the relation of persons with one another, (c) the relation of persons with the natural world, and (d) one's relation with oneself."^{vii} The peace of Jesus, then, is a deep and abiding peace that affects whole persons and communities, bringing harmony to all aspects of life. When the heavenly choir promises peace, it promises peace indeed!

Now hear the song of the heavenly host as we seek to identify the recipients of this peace of Christ.

Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his
favor rests.

The promise is for those favored by God, but who are these? Talbert notes that God's favor makes two more appearances in the Gospel of Luke. First, it rests on Jesus at his baptism (3:22). Second, it rests on Jesus' disciples (12:32). "Hence, it is among Jesus and his disciples that there is peace among humans."^{viii} Today we might say that this peace is promised to the continuing community of Jesus' disciples, also known as the Church.

This may seem an audacious claim when we consider our own experiences as Christians. While we certainly affirm that peace with God has been achieved through the work of Jesus, peace with ourselves, others, and the surrounding world can be elusive. How can we square the promise of peace with concrete experience?

To begin, perfect peace is an object of Christian hope. Take a moment to read these descriptions from Revelation of the new creation that will be inaugurated by God.

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first

A Note on Translation

The King James Version of the Bible translates the song of the heavenly host as, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Because we have often heard the Christmas story in Luke read from the KJV, this translation is familiar to us. Newer scholarship, however, points to a translation more along the lines of the NIV's, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." The difference rests on how to translate "good will," which in more recent translations is a status enjoyed by some people (peace to those on whom his favor [or good will] rests) rather than a general feeling toward all people (good will toward men).

earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

Revelation 21:1-5a

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Revelation 22:1-5

These are idyllic descriptions of the perfect reign of God, and while they do not mention peace specifically, it is most certainly assumed. We read in these passages of a time when there will be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain. We read of the healing of the nations. These passages draw our attention to the Christian hope that God will have the last word in history and that the word he will speak will be life and peace. Therefore, though we groan in the present in the absence of peace, we wait expectantly for the peace of God. In these moments of hopeful expectation, we join with the Revelator in saying, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." (Rev. 22:20)

While naming peace as an object of hope is theologically appropriate, to stop there would be faulty. Yes, perfect peace will be brought only by the decisive movement of God in the future. This is not to say, though, that God does not move in the present. Indeed, he does, and even as we wait for his perfect future peace, we experience tastes of that peace in the here and now. In speaking of this peace, Talbert states, "...the wholeness of the basic relations of life is being recovered as a result of Jesus' birth and lordship."^{ix} The dual concepts of birth and lordship prove helpful for discussion of peace in the present, for they enable us to think in terms of gift and commitment.

When we think of the birth of Christ, we affirm it as a gift. A sinful world has no claim on the grace of God, yet grace is freely given in Christ. The birth of Christ, then, is

God's great gift to a sinful world. Just as the birth of Christ is a gift, so also is the peace bestowed on his people. We see this concept of peace as gift often in the greetings of letters in the New Testament as they declare "grace and peace" in some form or other on their recipients (Rom. 1:7, 1 Cor. 1:3, 2 Cor. 1:2, Gal. 1:3, Eph. 1:2, Col. 1:2, 1 Thes. 1:1, 2 Thes. 1:2, 1 Tim. 1:2, 2 Tim. 1:2, Tit. 1:4, Phm. 1:3, 1 Pet. 1:2, 2 Pet. 1:2, 2 John 1:3, Rev. 1:4). Most often, these greetings name grace and peace as flowing from God the Father and the Lord Jesus. These words stand as blessings pronounced on the various congregations they address. Peace, then, is a blessing – a gift – of God that the authors of the New Testament proclaim over their congregations.

Often, however, the same letters that speak the blessing of peace over congregations call those same congregations to live in peace as well. See, for instance, Philippians 2:2, where Paul calls a divided congregation to "make [his] joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind." This is where the lordship of Christ comes into play, for the child whose birth was pure gift to a sinful world was born to rule. Thus, even as the blessing of peace is pronounced on a congregation, it is expected that congregants will pursue peace as they commit themselves to the way of Jesus. In this light, peace comes as a gift of God to his people and as a product of that same people's commitment to the lordship of Christ.

Of course, peace can be hard to find in a fallen world. Even in the walls of the church, peace is elusive, and we often groan as we experience the lack of wholeness in the various relations of life. What then are we to do? First, we can pray for the gift of peace to enter our lives and relationships. Second, we can commit ourselves to the way of Jesus. In doing so, we commit ourselves to the pursuit of peace in the various aspects of life. Third, we can set our hope firmly on the perfect peace that will accompany Christ at his second coming. Then we will no longer taste peace imperfectly. No, we will sit at the banquet table of the Messiah, and we will revel in the perfect peace he has won.

Witness

Having received the heavenly message of the Savior's birth, the shepherds spring into action. They go immediately to Bethlehem and find the child lying in a manger just as they were told. Imagine their boldness in this endeavor. The angel told the shepherds that Jesus had been born in the town of David (Bethlehem), but he didn't get more specific than that. To find the child, the shepherds would have had to hunt through the town, looking for the strange sight of a baby lying in a feeding trough. They do not waver in their resolve, however, and they find the child they seek.

Next, these unworthy recipients of majesty become unworthy witnesses to the same. As 2:17-18 tells us, "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." Notice the strangeness of this account. It has been noted

above that shepherds were not considered trustworthy, yet they are the ones to spread the news of the heavenly message. Beyond this, they lack credentials. These are not experts in scripture, nor are they respected town leaders. What makes people like these worthy to speak the heavenly message?

To put it simply, the shepherds are worthy because of their experience. Notice that they do not expound scripture, nor do they offer proofs of what they speak. Instead, “they spread the word concerning *what had been told them* about this child” (2:17; emphasis added). Having been graced with the heavenly message, the shepherds share their experience. They are not worthy because of their backgrounds or their place in society. No, they are worthy simply because God chose to speak to them. They speak from experience, and the people are amazed.

After offering witness, the shepherds return to their flocks in the country praising God. Their chapter in the story ends, but their witness intrudes on the present. They challenge God’s people, who are also the unworthy recipients of majesty, to do the same.

Application

There is no doubt that Luke’s account of the shepherds holds much application for the lives of believers. To begin, the unworthiness of the shepherds draws our attention to the unworthiness of us all. We may not all be at the less-respected end of the social spectrum, but we all stand unworthy of God’s grace. As Paul says in Romans 3:23, “...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Just as we are shocked to see the heavenly host grace shepherds with its presence, so also must we be shocked to know that we have become recipients of the good news that the host proclaimed. Majesty for the unworthy is not only a passing theme in the account of the shepherds. No, it is the constant theme of the gospel that reconciles unworthy sinners to a holy God. As we consider the story of the shepherds, we should take a moment to remember our own unworthiness and thank God for the majesty he has so freely bestowed on us in the gift of his Son.

As we identify with the unworthiness of the shepherds, we must at the same time be careful not to spiritualize their low place in society. To do so would be to overlook another important point of application: the gospel’s breaking of social barriers. Often in his ministry, Jesus spent time with the “wrong people.” See, for instance, Luke 5:27-32. In this passage, Jesus eats with “tax collectors and sinners,” and it isn’t long before “the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples.” Jesus is challenging their social conventions, and he does the same today. In the story of the shepherds, we hear a challenge to see people as God sees them rather than holding to our own ideas of the “in-crowd.” All

people are potential recipients of God's grace, and this reality should shape our interactions with all sections of society.

More than affecting our societal interactions, the shepherds' account also reminds us that the life of the Church is to be marked by a kind of blindness to social station. Paul reminds us in Galatians 3 that in the Church "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (v. 28). James brings this point home practically in saying, "believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism" (2:1). He then proceeds to argue that the rich should not be given special treatment in the Christian assembly. The story of the shepherds reminds us that all Christians, whether rich or poor, powerful or weak, respected or shunned, worthy or unworthy in the sight of the world, are all together the children of God. As such, the pecking orders of the world have no place in our fellowship, for we see one another from the vantage point of the cross, around which all ground is level.

Moving from the unworthiness of the shepherds, we can now consider the message they received. As shown above, that message critiques worldly power. Caesar may be heralded as a savior who brings peace, but his salvation and peace pale in comparison to those offered in Christ. In a country deeply divided along political lines, it may be fruitful to consider our allegiance. Which is more formative in our lives: the teachings of Jesus or the stances of our favored political parties? While Jesus does not condemn everything Republicans and Democrats stand for, he certainly offers challenges to both, and he calls his own people to rally around himself as the hope of the world rather than around the political powerhouses of our day.

Along the same lines, we can ask ourselves whether we are welcoming the peace of Christ into our lives. His peace is far deeper than merely the absence of conflict. It is peace that leads to fullness of life! As Jesus' followers, have we committed ourselves to seeking this peace? Do we pray for it, inviting the blessing of peace into our midst? And have we placed our hope firmly on the perfect peace that is our inheritance in Christ? As Christians, we are called to be a people of peace, and the story of the shepherds challenges us to receive and embody the peace promised to those on whom God's favor rests.

Last, we can consider the witness of the shepherds. So often, we disqualify ourselves from witnessing because we believe that we lack the proper credentials. The shepherds challenge us on this count precisely because they also lacked proper credentials, at least by worldly standards. These were not the respected in society. More than this, they were viewed as dishonest. Nothing qualifies them for the task of witness. That is, nothing except their experience. As recipients of majesty, they witness to what they have seen and heard. In this light, the only prerequisite to witness is a visitation by God! All of us who have called on the name of the Lord can claim such a visitation. Our visitations may not have been as grand as a visitation by

the host of heaven, but they are real nonetheless. The shepherds invite us to witness to Christ not because we are the most respected, not because we are the most knowledgeable, not because we have all the answers, but simply because we have become the underserving recipients of majesty. We speak from our experience of the God who saves.

Importantly, witness is not only a personal act. It has corporate dimensions as well. Thus, the gathered body of the Church witnesses to its experience of God through worship on Sunday mornings. Beyond this, the Church also witnesses to Christ through its continuing commitment to and experience of the peace promised by the heavenly host. We can think here of Jesus' words in John 13:35, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Wholeness of relationships between members of the congregation serves as a witness to Jesus. In this sense, the Church witnesses through its present experience of Christ. Where peace is present among his people, Jesus is lifted high. In this we see that followers of Jesus have become his witnesses both personally and corporately. Once again, this is not because of any qualifications that we have on our own. No, we testify to and through our continuing experience of the risen Christ.

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, "What is your favorite Christmas song and why?" Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

Introduction: Remind the class of December's Advent focus. Then let them know that today's lesson will focus on the Advent theme of Witness by focusing on the characters of the shepherds.

Question: Ask participants what they remember about the shepherds in the Christmas story. Offer clarifications as needed by drawing on the Shepherds section above.

Shepherds:

- **Question:** Ask participants to imagine that the president of the United States is making a trip to Durham. At a dinner in his honor, who will be invited?
 - Note that people of importance are usually surrounded by people of importance.
- **Question:** Remind class members of the example of the president. Now ask who we would expect to receive the announcement of the birth of the Son of God from the heavenly host.

- **Scripture Passage:** Have a class member read Luke 2:8-14.
- **Explain:** While we might expect the news of Jesus' birth to be proclaimed to social elites at the temple or royal palace, it is instead proclaimed to lowly shepherds in the Bethlehem backcountry. For some reason, majesty is being visited on the unworthy.
- **Question:** Ask class members to name reasons why the shepherds rather than more important people received this message. Possible answers: the gospel is for all people, God is not a respecter of wealth or social station, etc.
- **Question:** Ask if there are any ways that we can identify with the shepherds in this story.
- **Explain:** Quote Romans 3:23 ("for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God") and remind class members that all of us stand unworthy before a holy God because of sin. Like the shepherds, we are unworthy of God's attention, yet we have received grace in Christ. In the case of the gospel, majesty is *always* visited on the unworthy.
- **Application Point:** The story of the shepherds invites us to consider our own unworthiness before God. Our awareness of our unworthiness should lead us to thanksgiving and praise of the God who has graced us with majesty.
- **Explain:** Point out to the class that we need to be careful in spiritualizing the shepherds' experience. While we can identify with their unworthiness spiritually, the concrete reality of their low social station offers a challenge to the Church.
- **Question:** Ask participants if God likes rich people or poor people better in light of the story of the shepherds. Point out that this story shows a levelling of the playing field. The rich and powerful are not favored above the poor and weak.
- **Question:** If this is the case with God, then what should the Church's response be to the things that separate us in society?
- **Scripture Passages:** Have class members read the following scripture passages:
 - James 2:1-4
 - Ask what this passage teaches about social status in the Church.
 - Galatians 3:28
 - Note that favoritism must be excluded because we "are all one in Christ."
- **Question:** Ask class members to identify ramifications of these passages on fellowship and leadership in the Church.
- **Application Point:** In the story of the shepherds, we see God refusing to show favoritism to the elite in society. As God's people, we should do the same.

Peace

- **Explain:** Let participants know that the focus of the lesson will now focus on the message that the shepherds received.
- **Scripture Passage:** Have a class member read the following scripture passage:
 - Luke 2:10-14
 - Ask participants to summarize the message.
 - Note that the heavenly host promises peace.
- **Question:** Ask participants to define peace.
- **Explain:** Define peace in light of the Hebrew term *shalom* (see The Peace of Christ section above for more on this).
- **Question:** Ask participants to identify who this peace is for. Explain the differences between translations in v. 14. (See The Peace of Christ section for answers to these questions.)
- **Question:** If the promise of peace is for the Church, then how do we receive it? (See The Peace of Christ section above for more on this.)
- **Application Point:** As followers of Jesus, we are recipients of the promise of peace. Peace comes as a gift but also through commitment to the way of Jesus.

Witness

- **Question:** Ask participant to identify qualities of a good witness. Then ask if the shepherds meet any of these. (Reminder: shepherds were considered untrustworthy)
- **Scripture Passage:** Have a class member read the following scripture passage:
 - Luke 2:15-20
- **Question:** In the passage, what makes the shepherds worthy of witnessing to the newborn Christ?
- **Question:** What makes us worthy of witnessing to Christ?
- **Application Point:** The shepherds are fit witnesses because of their experience. So can we also witness to our experience of Jesus even though we may not feel qualified in other ways.

ⁱ Brown, Raymond E. *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*. Doubleday & Company: Garden City, New York. p. 420, see footnote 38.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Talbert, Charles H. *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*. Reading the New Testament Series. Smyth & Helwys: Macon, Georgia, 2002. p. 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Garland's different version of the same quotation in Garland, David E. _____

^{iv} Garland, ____.

^v Garland, 126.

^{vi} Garland, 127.

^{vii} Talbert, 32.

^{viii} Talbert, 33.

^{ix} Talbert, 33.