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**The Shepherds' Visitation**  
**Series: The Angels' Advent**  
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**The Village Church**  
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I. **Shepherds – Seriously?**

- A. Ivory Palaces
  - 1. Out of the ivory palaces,
  - 2. Into a world of woe,
  - 3. Only His great eternal love
  - 4. Made my Savior go.
- B. A wonderful hymn of Henry Barraclough, dating from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century
  - 1. It speaks of the incarnation
    - a. And is often used in Advent and Christmas
    - b. As it represents the incarnation of God the Son
    - c. Coming from the glories of His heavenly throne
    - d. To the troubles of this broken and fallen world
  - 2. The condescension of God
    - a. From glory to gory
    - b. Is the very essence of the coming of Christ at Christmas
- C. At first glance, Barraclough's hymn exhibits the characteristics of the romanticism of his day
  - 1. With its rich metaphors and anthropomorphic imagery
- D. Example
  - 1. "My Lord has garments so wondrous fine,
  - 2. And myrrh their texture fills..."
  - 3. [My mother-in-law used to wear perfume so frequently and generously, that the fragrance would infuse her clothing...
  - 4. [And even later when she didn't wear perfume, it didn't matter; her clothing exuded her scent when she entered the room!]
- E. Another example
  - 1. "His garments, too, were in cassia dipped..."
  - 2. [Cassia appears to have some medicinal purposes in traditional medicine...
  - 3. [And in its poetic form it speaks of the healing properties of the One whose garments are infused by its baptism]
- F. But Henry Barraclough was no mere poet; his biblical knowledge and theological acumen exceeds most of ours
  - 1. The images in his hymn come from an OT text – from Psalm 45
  - 2. **Psalm 45:6–9** (ESV) —

- a. 6 Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness;
  - b. 7 you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.
  - c. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions; [quoted in the NT, in **Hebrews 1.3-9** and applied to Christ]
  - d. 8 your robes are **all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.**
  - e. **From ivory palaces** stringed instruments make you glad;
  - f. 9 daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor;
  - g. at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.
- G. So this is not mere romanticism
- 1. Psalm 45 – this love-song to the King of kings, seated on His throne, is applied to Christ in the NT
  - 2. And it is no great leap to see the grand condescension of the glories of the King to the guts and gore of our earthly existence in the incarnation
    - a. And Barraclough has captured it masterfully
  - 3. The contrast between the majesty and glory of Christ’s life in His heavenly existence – the ivory palaces
    - a. And the woes of this dreadful world
    - b. Is stark and arresting
  - 4. And as we celebrate this Advent, we too ought to be arrested, even startled by that contrast
- H. Nowhere is the contrast more evident in the NT than in the account of angels’ visitation to the shepherds keeping watch o’er their fields
- I. **But shepherds – really?**
- 1. The angels are the messengers of glory
  - 2. As we have seen in our series, **The Angels’ Advent**, they have delivered their prophetic messages
    - a. First to Zechariah regarding the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Messiah, preparing the way, as his wife Elizabeth would be with child in her old age
    - b. And then to Mary, the virgin who has not known a man
    - c. Who would also be with child – even more miraculously – through the agency of the Holy Spirit
    - d. And also to Joseph, the betrothed husband of Mary, who would be instructed not to divorce his betrothed when her pregnancy is made known
    - e. And instead take her to be his wife
  - 3. But now the child has been born to Mary, and the birth announcement to end all birth announcements must be made
    - a. And God dispatches, well, an avalanche of angels to deliver the good news, the glorious message of the incarnation of the Son of God
- J. Imagine then, the angels – swooping down from their heavenly abode
- 1. Heading toward Jerusalem

- a. Toward the “City of the Great King” (Psalm 48.2)
    - b. Beautiful in elevation... the joy of the whole earth
  - 2. The location of the temple, where the people of Israel gather to worship and sacrifice
    - a. Where the priests and Levites execute their ordained duties
  - 3. The place of the government of Judah
    - a. Where the palace of King Herod the Great and the residence of Pontius Pilate, the governor, are established
    - b. The seat of religious and military power and significance
- K. But the angels – what, do they get lost?
  - 1. Have they no GPS?
  - 2. Do they miss their exit?
  - 3. They fly past Jerusalem
    - a. They don’t even waive to Herod and Pilate and the priests and the Levites
    - b. They bypass them entirely
  - 4. And they head to the burbs
    - a. To a lowly suburb of Jerusalem
    - b. To Bethlehem, of all places
  - 5. And not even to Bethlehem
    - a. To a field outside Bethlehem
    - b. A field with no name, no reputation, no significance
  - 6. And there they find, not even a Roman Legion encampment
    - a. But a bunch of sheep
    - b. Attended by a group of lowly shepherds
- L. During Covid we were instructed about social distancing
  - 1. What that meant was that we were supposed to stay a certain distance away from each other to diminish the spread of the pandemic
    - a. And that was called social distancing
  - 2. Well, social distancing is a better term to describe the difference in social status between the wealthy, the powerful, the influential
    - a. And the lowest of the low in society
    - b. And the lowest of the low in that society were the shepherds
  - 3. There would be no greater social distance than between the Herods, the Pilates, the priests, and the Levites
    - a. And the shepherds
- M. Shepherds were the outcasts of Jewish society
  - 1. By virtue of their occupation – the keeping of animals – the religious authorities were convinced that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to keep the Jewish laws of uncleanness, especially as the man-made laws added layers of requirements
  - 2. And not only that, shepherds had the reputation of being pretty shady characters
    - a. Of enhancing their meager compensation by helping themselves to the goods of their masters when their backs were turned

3. They were regarded as the swindlers and shoplifters of their day
  - a. So shepherds were not allowed to give testimony in a court of law
  - b. Their lack of trustworthiness being legendary
- N. But God has a glorious message to deliver
  1. A message of good news – great news in fact!
  2. But He sends His avalanche of angelic messengers – past the situated and powerful and influential
    - a. And has them descend to a world of woe
    - b. Descend to the lowest of the social low
  3. He sends them past Jerusalem to a bunch of dirty shepherds in a field near a forsaken suburb
- O. And yet – how appropriate!
  1. For the baby born to Mary and Joseph is the King of kings of Psalm 45
    - a. His throne is forever and ever
    - b. The scepter of His kingdom is of uprightness
    - c. He is anointed with the oil of gladness
    - d. And He has come from Ivory palaces
  2. And has come into – not even a room at Motel 6
    - a. To a stable, a shed – a place where animals bed for the night
- P. So why wouldn't the glorious angelic host head for the shepherds' field?

## II. The Glory

- A. Luke 2:8–9 (ESV) —
  1. 8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.
  2. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them,
  3. and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
  4. and they were filled with great fear.
- B. We don't know what the angel looked like
  1. But it's clear, based on the reaction of the shepherds, that he must have been a magnificent angel
    - a. For they were filled with great fear
    - b. Phobeo megas (Gk) – mega-fear!
  2. But even more than the angel himself – which would have evoked fear in all of us in such an unexpected evening
    - a. He is surrounded by the glory of the Lord
    - b. The glory is said to shine! “The glory of the Lord shone around them”
- C. You might wonder what it is about my preaching that gets the most criticism
  1. I'll tell you what it is
    - a. It's not my excessive use of the word “propitiation”
  2. No, the most frequent criticism of my preaching is that when I'm preaching the stage lights are so bright that they shine off of my head in a way that is distracting

3. I've tried to respond to such criticism by saying that it's just the glory of the Lord
  - a. That's never been convincing
  - b. Plus, nobody's ever been filled with great fear
- D. But in this case, the glory of the Lord has come down with the angels
  1. Down to encounter these lowly shepherds
    - a. Whose existence is anything but glorious
  2. One is reminded of the glory cloud which enveloped the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration
    - a. Or of the glory which shone reflectively in the face of Moses when He had come from the presence of God
    - b. In which the people, in fear, made Moses put a veil over his face
- E. If ever these shepherds had any doubt about the identity and credentials of the angels, it would have been cast aside by the glory
  1. The glory was the business card of the angels
    - a. The badge carrying the authority of the real King
  2. And there was no doubt in every one of the shepherds that they were in the presence of a power that could overcome them in an instant
  3. They might not have had fear of wolves invading their flock
    - a. Or of bear that might attack
  4. But of angelic glory – they were paralyzed by fear

### III. **The Proclamation**

#### A. **The Affirmation**

1. **Luke 2:10** (ESV) —
  - a. 10 And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.
2. The angel recognizes the moment
  - a. He recognizes the fear that the magnificent glory has evoked in these decrepit humans
3. And he gives an affirmation, an encouragement
  - a. Indeed – a command
  - b. It is the most frequent command in the Bible
  - c. Happening in the OT and NT more than two dozen times
  - d. A command delivered to God's people, to believers
4. It is simply this: “Fear not!”
5. “There is no reason to fear!” says the angel
  - a. “So relax”
  - b. “I have a message to deliver”
  - c. “And if you're paralyzed by fear you're not likely to hear or understand the message!”
  - d. “So, settle down; control your emotions, and listen”
6. But typically of the Bible, such commands come with a reason
  - a. And it is simply this

- b. “Don’t be afraid! Because I’m not bringing bad news, news of judgment, news of catastrophe or tragedy”
  - c. “I’m bringing good news”
  - d. **Euangelizo (Gk)**
  - e. It is the root word for our word evangelize or evangelism
  - f. Our word for gospel – the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself!
7. While to the shepherds, as the announcement is just unfolding, it is simply good news in general
- a. But as the announcement comes to the point, it becomes good news in particular
  - b. Good news in what we know of as the gospel
  - c. The good news of Jesus Christ, our Savior!
8. Now it’s one thing to not be afraid – a negative emotion
- a. But this news is meant to replace the negative emotion with a positive one
  - b. Indeed – a much more positive one!
  - c. Good new of **Great Joy!**
  - d. **Megas chara (Gk)** – mega joy!
9. This turns the tables on our emotions
- a. From great fear to great joy
  - b. Which, again, is perfectly appropriate to the occasion
  - c. Which is from the ivory palaces into a world of woe
  - d. The world of woe ought to be greatly thrilled with the grand condescension of the incarnation of the Son of God
- B. **The Birth Announcement**
1. **Luke 2:11** (ESV) —
- a. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.
2. So from general good news to specific!
- a. This is why this is good news which should evoke great joy
  - b. Today a baby is born
3. But babies are born all the time
- a. It’s not surprising that in a city like Bethlehem there would be babies born
  - b. But this is not ordinary baby
4. This baby is **Savior**
- a. I put it that way on purpose
  - b. Translators had added the indefinite article: “a Savior”
  - c. But the indefinite article is not in the original
  - d. The original simply emphasizes the proper noun
  - e. The baby is “Savior”
5. We’ve already seen in the messages delivered to Mary and Joseph that this is why the baby is named Jesus
- a. “For He will save His people from their sins”

6. And not only is this baby Savior
  - a. He is Christ
  - b. He is the anointed one – the Messiah
  - c. Christ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Messiah
  - d. The promised One who be the Mediator of the New Covenant
  - e. He is the object of all the prophecies of the OT
  - f. The One that the godly Jew has been waiting for
  - g. Waiting for – for centuries!
7. And not only is He Messiah or Christ
  - a. He is the Lord
  - b. **Kurios (Gk)**
  - c. Certainly it means the sovereign one
  - d. But more than that, the Greek kurios is the word used to translate the Hebrew Yahweh, or Jehovah, in the OT
  - e. The very name of God
8. So this announcement is, in fact, *the* quintessential announcement of the incarnation
  - a. That God would become man
  - b. That grand condescension from ivory palaces into a world of woe would in fact take place
9. The announcement
  - a. “On this day (we don’t really know whether it was December 25 or not),
  - b. “God, the ruler of heaven and earth
  - c. “Is pleased to announce the birth of His Son
  - d. “To His human mother Mary
  - e. “In the town of Bethlehem, the city of David
  - f. “Who will continue the royal line of David
  - g. “And He will be Savior of all those who will call upon Him in faith,
  - h. “And He is the One I promised I would send.
  - i. “He was in the beginning with Me
  - j. “And He was, as I am, God,
  - k. “And He has come in the flesh!”
10. That’s what God’s birth announcement said!
  - a. And that would be joy for all the people
  - b. All the people who are believers!
  - c. Those are the ones for whom this is good news
  - d. The ones who will find themselves transformed from great fear to great joy

C. **The Sign**

1. **Luke 2:12** (ESV) —
  - a. 12 “And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

2. As if they glory of the Lord wasn't sign enough for these lowly shepherds, the angel gives them another sign
  - a. They will find, in Bethlehem, this baby
3. Now they wouldn't find this baby just anywhere
  - a. They wouldn't find this baby in the neonatal unit of the local hospital
  - b. (Ok, so they didn't have hospitals in those days, let alone neonatal units)
  - c. But they wouldn't find this baby in any of the places where babies were normally born – like in homes
4. No! They would find this baby in the one place where you wouldn't expect to find new-born babies
  - a. They would find this baby where they would feed the animals!
  - b. They would find this baby in the stables – in a manger
  - c. He would be in a feeding trough of all places!
5. In today's world they would have told us – here is your sign
  - a. Don't look in Health Park or Lee Memorial for this baby
  - b. Don't even look in the comforts of home
  - c. No! Go to the local kennel, or to the shed on a farm where they are raising cattle
  - d. Go to where the cattle are born
  - e. And when you find a baby there – that's the one!
6. We usually make a big deal – and rightly so – about there being to room in the inn,
  - a. And that Mary and Joseph didn't have the resources to arrange proper housing
  - b. And that the birth of Jesus in a manger was a manifestation of their poverty and of the humble circumstances of His birth
7. But it's all of that and more
  - a. It's a sign!
  - b. Babies aren't born in mangers!
  - c. But if you find a baby in a manger in Bethlehem – that's the One!

D. **The Song**

1. **Luke 2:13–14** (ESV) —
  - a. 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,
  - b. 14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”
2. Whoa! What now?
  - a. Not just one angel, surrounded by glory
  - b. Now we have an entire avalanche of angels!
  - c. A multitude of the heavenly host!
3. I think this is the grace of God
  - a. That one angel to begin with was a better option



- b. To reveal the whole multitude in the first place, the angels wouldn't have just been afraid
- c. They would have had heart attacks and strokes!
- 4. But now the one angel is joined by an army of angels
  - a. But the army doesn't march and they don't fight
  - b. They sing!
- 5. They sing just like we did!
- 6. "Glory to God in the highest!"
  - a. Gloria in excelsis Deo!
  - b. (We always like a little Latin thrown in there!)
- 7. Now just think about it
  - a. Think about how long the angels have waited to sing this song!
  - b. They were present way back when the Law was presented to Moses
  - c. They were present for all the prophecies of Messiah
  - d. They were present as God worked out the history of redemption through all the centuries through the people of Israel
  - e. They had heard all the promises God made to His people
  - f. And they anticipated the fulfillment of the promises
- 8. And now, finally!
  - a. Here is Messiah; Christ, the Lord!
  - b. Savior!
  - c. He has come!
  - d. God with us – Emmanuel!
- 9. These are "things into which angels long to look." (1 Peter 1.12)
- 10. And they erupt!
  - a. We wait for years
  - b. They have waited for millennia!
  - c. And they exult in adoration and praise!
- 11. And we mere humans just sing
  - a. If the angels are so exuberant, why not we?

#### IV. The Shepherds' Response

##### A. Their Determination

- 1. Luke 2:15–16 (ESV) —
  - a. 15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another,
  - b. "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."
  - c. 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.
- 2. You know, the shepherds were never told to go
  - a. They were never given instructions like the angels gave to Zechariah and Mary and Joseph
  - b. But they were given pretty good hints!
- 3. "You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger"

- a. That's the sign they were given
- b. But you don't get the sign unless you go
- 4. So the shepherds don't do with this news what most humans do with the good news of Jesus
  - a. Say, "Well, that's nice; now what's for dinner?"
  - b. No! They say, "We must go!"
  - c. "We can't miss the Savior"
  - d. "We've got to see Christ, the Lord"
- 5. So they went to Bethlehem – in haste!
  - a. (I pity the poor guy who drew the short straw and stayed back with the sheep! I've always worried about him)
  - b. But they went through the crowded streets of Bethlehem, from one stable to another, until they found the one with a baby lying in a manger
- 6. They would not be denied this encounter with Jesus, who would save His people from their sins

B. **Their Message**

- 1. **Luke 2:17–18** (ESV) —
  - a. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.
  - b. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.
- 2. And so they told their story
  - a. To Mary and Joseph
  - b. And to any other onlookers who happened to be around
- 3. It didn't matter that they were shepherds
  - a. That they had no social standing
  - b. That they couldn't give testimony in a court of law
  - c. That they smelled like the animals in the stable
- 4. They told them the story of the angel – and of the angels
  - a. Of the singing
  - b. Of the message given to them
  - c. That this child is Savior, Christ, the Lord!
- 5. They were afraid of the angels
  - a. But were not afraid to tell this miraculous story
- 6. And just like they weren't commanded to go find the child
  - a. They weren't commanded to tell the story
  - b. But how could they not tell the story!

C. **Their Worship**

- 1. When they were finished, they went back to their place of business; back to work
  - a. But look how they returned
- 2. **Luke 2:20** (ESV) —
  - a. 20 And the shepherds returned,
  - b. glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

3. They were changed people
  - a. They were transformed into worshipers
  - b. They glorified and praised God for all they had encountered
4. Are you likewise transformed into a worshiper of God through an encounter with Jesus?
  - a. Jesus who came to save His people from their sins?
  - b. Jesus who is Savior, Christ, the Lord?
5. If not yet – why not now?
  - a. What are you waiting for?
  - b. The shepherds went in haste
  - c. What's keeping you?

V. **Mary's Heart**

- A. But I skipped a verse
- B. **Luke 2:19** (ESV) —
  1. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.
- C. Just think of all the things Mary had to treasure as a young girl
  1. Pregnant without having known a man
  2. Visited by the angel Gabriel and told she would bear the child who is the Son of God
  3. Having heard the story of Elizabeth from her own mouth of Zechariah's angelic encounter
    - a. And of Elizabeth's pregnancy in her old age
  4. And the story of Joseph's dreamy encounter with an angel
  5. And of the excruciating journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem on a donkey as a 9-month pregnant woman
    - a. And of the impossibility of finding a room once they arrived
  6. And now, having gone through labor in a shed, and having delivered a baby, placing him in a feeding trough – they hadn't brought the crib with them!
  7. And now finally – this extraordinary story of the shepherds and their encounter with the angelic host
  8. How her mind must have been filled
    - a. Her heart to overflowing
- D. Is your heart overflowing?
  1. Is your mind treasuring?
  2. Are your thoughts pondering?
- E. These were momentous times
  1. For Mary, Joseph
  2. For the shepherds
  3. They would never be the same
- F. But right now – as you have engaged with these angelic encounters – are momentous times for you
  1. How will you respond?