

The Last Ones to Know

Mike Southern
December 2018

There's something about the Christmas Story that fascinates me—namely, how each of the gospel writers handles it differently.

Matthew focuses on the political angle and tells us about the Wise Men; John ignores the details and gives us a poem that starts with “In the beginning was the Word...”; and Mark doesn't talk about it at all, choosing instead to begin with Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist.

And then there's Luke, believed to be the doctor who traveled with Paul. He tells us about the lives of the common people involved. Luke is the only writer to tell us about the shepherds, who were the last ones to hear about Christ's birth. (The Wise Men had known about it for months, since they had to travel all the way from Babylon.)

But you can be sure they NEVER forgot the announcement!

This story comes from Luke 2:8-20.

Bethlehem is known as “the city of David” because King David was born there.
It was—and still is—a small village about six miles south of Jerusalem.
Contrary to modern thoughts about the first Christmas,
Bethlehem rarely gets snow
and the temperature rarely drops to freezing.
The summers are hot and dry, the winters mild and wet.
And while it's a much smaller place than nearby Jerusalem,
it's also at a higher elevation than the great city.

In other words, Bethlehem has always been hill country
with wide open spaces and few people,
a quiet place where news traveled slowly
and very few exciting things happened.
Every night was just like the night before... and the night after.
Back then it was a relatively safe place for sheep to graze,
away from the hustle and bustle of the city.
In a word, life in Bethlehem was *boring*.

And the shepherds were just fine with that.
You see, sheep aren't very smart.
They wander off and get lost.
They have to be led to water, even when it's nearby.
They're easy prey for wolves and bears
and once, young David even mentioned fighting a mountain lion!
Raising sheep was how the shepherds made their living,
so *quiet* was just the way they liked it.

This night was just like any other night... and then it wasn't.

Can you can imagine the panic when an ANGEL appeared in their midst?
One moment the hillside was quiet,
 gently lit by the moon and stars on a clear night,
 the sheep grazing silently (except for an occasional *baa*)...
and suddenly the darkness vanished in a blaze of bright light.
The shepherds threw their hands up in front of their faces,
 momentarily blinded.
And as their eyes finally adjusted, they saw,
 standing right in front of them, so close they could touch him,
 a man dressed in shining white robes.
They were terrified, and yet the sheep hadn't even taken notice of him!
 They continued to graze as if nothing had happened.

Then the man smiled at them. "Don't be afraid," he said,
 "for I have come to tell you about a great joy
 that soon *everybody* will know.
This very day, in the City of David,
 God's promised Messiah has been born!
And this is how you will recognize him:
 The baby is wrapped in a simple cloth blanket,
 lying in a manger."

And if that wasn't enough,
 suddenly the sky around the shepherds was filled with other angels,
 thousands and thousands of them,
 all singing together:
 "Glory to God in the highest,
 and on earth, peace and good will to all men."

Then, as suddenly as they appeared, they were gone.

How long did the shepherds sit on that hillside after the angels vanished,
 too overcome by shock and wonder to move?
The Bible doesn't tell us...
 but we know it wasn't long before they looked at each other and said,
 "You know, the angel told us how to find this baby.
 We should go into Bethlehem and see Him for ourselves!"
So they left their sheep all alone on the hillside,
 and they were so excited that they ran all the way back to town.
 When they arrived,
 they found other people had gathered at the stable as well.
Inside, they found Joseph, Mary and Jesus, just as the angel had said they would,
 so they told Mary and Joseph exactly what had happened
 and what the angel had told them about their little boy.
The other people who had gathered were amazed by the story...
 but for Mary, it was just more proof
 that she really had been chosen by God,
 and what they said helped her deal with the hard days ahead.

Then the shepherds went back to their sheep,
praising God for what he had done
and for inviting them to see His Messiah.

Many years later, Jesus told the crowds following Him
“the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.”

The shepherds were not ‘important’ to most people...
but they were to God.

They may have been the last ones to know He had been born,
but they were among the first to see Him.

Christmas reminds us that God blesses each of us
according to His own love for us,
and not based on how the world sees us.

It truly is “good news of great joy.”