

Christmas Day 2024 – Luke 2:8-16 ‘Seeking’

If I was to ask you who are the spiritual seekers in the nativity story, I wonder what you would answer? I expect most of you would say ‘The Wise Men’ (or Kings or Magi – call them what you will!). After all, they fit all the criteria: educated astrologers, enquiring minds always looking for signs in the sky and in their prophetic writings; and then, of course, they are literal seekers as well as spiritual ones: travelling hundreds of miles around the fertile crescent from Iran to Israel – even asking the old king where to find the new one.

So yes, the Magi are of course, spiritual seekers... but they’re not the only ones. In their own way, the shepherds are, too. We can infer that quite quickly from the fact that they hurried to Bethlehem when they received the news – they didn’t wait or prevaricate, they just went. They were hungry; they were *seekers*.

To understand why, it helps to know a bit of the background: Bethlehem as a town had two main industries. Its name means ‘house of bread’ and its fields to the west supplied much of this staple food to Jerusalem and the surrounding area. However, it also had another valuable industry: its shepherds provided many of the lambs for the temple sacrifices in Jerusalem. So these shepherds had an incredibly valuable job, a job which was integral to the worshipping life of the nation. The sheep that they left exposed to predators on Christmas night in their hunger to meet the new-born King were **not just any old sheep: they were the most important flocks in Israel**, the ones which the nation relied upon for their sacrifices at the temple.

In modern-day terms it would be like the keepers of the horses at the Royal Stud in Sandringham leaving all their thoroughbred race-horses out in the bitter cold last week to go and do something else. These animals *matter*. It would have to be something spectacularly important to abdicate your post in the way the shepherds did.

And today I want to pick up on three short phrases in our famous text to help us appreciate the shepherds, and perhaps also speak to us today. **The first is in v8: ‘keeping watch’.** This is a lovely phrase: they weren’t just looking after, they were *keeping watch*: to use an old-fashioned phrase, they were watchmen.

This is significant, because our Old Testament reading from Isaiah is a great promise that one day beautiful voices would bring good news on the mountains of Israel, declaring the salvation of God and hope for the people. And the people who respond first to this message are the watchmen, who lift their voices joyfully in praise. **Fast forward several centuries and here we see the prophecy fulfilled in a most literal way.** Beautiful voices declare over the hills of Israel a message of good news: good news of a Saviour. And they declare it to the current equivalent of the watchmen: shepherds keeping watch over their flocks.

This passage is not just a nice story: God is up to something here, the ancient prophecies are being fulfilled by the shepherds just as much as they were by the Magi. And it causes us to pause and reflect: are we keeping watch? Are we looking out for what God is up to? As Jesus says later in the gospel: ‘when the Son of Man comes, will he still find faith on the earth?’

Second, let's move on to **the message of the angels: v12 'you will find'**. Of course the only people who find are those who seek. The shepherds are being invited to focus their seeking in one place: 'a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger'. Little did they know the magnitude of what they would find, although they were so amazed by it they told everyone they knew.

Again, there's a backdrop here: these were keepers of the lambs who became sacrifices to God. Could they have glimpsed that they were gazing at a special person who would one day become the ultimate sacrifice? (Something we'll share in a moment in bread and wine.) Easter is fully a part of the Christmas Story, if we're looking carefully.

The shepherds took the angels at their word: 'you will find' – and they did. Will we take the angels at their word too? Will you find the Saviour of the world, lying in the manger? This is more than a story, it is hope for the world.

Finally, let's see **the shepherds' response: 'let's go and see'**. It is a response not just of hope, but of trust and of adventure. It is a practical response, too: where faith becomes lived experience. That same baby invites as us all to go and see, to turn our tiny bit, our mustard seed, of faith into lived experience, too.

The good news, the glorious news of Christmas is as true today as ever. It is an invitation to keep watch, to find and to see. The Magi travelled to a new place, but **what makes the shepherds so compelling is that the story came into their world**; the angels met them where they were, in their ordinary lives. And this story meets us too, today, wherever we are. May we be filled with wonder and joy, and may we, like the shepherds, discover this amazing Saviour in a new way this Christmas. Amen.