The Shepherds
Luke 2:8-20

Over Advent, we looked at some of those who preceded Jesus in his family tree. But today and next Sunday, we're going to look at those who came after his birth to worship him.

And there's a reason for doing that. Because, depending on how your Christmas has gone, you're unlikely to stop loving Christmas, but you can get a bit familiar with it can't you? At least, what happened that first Christmas can begin to wash over us just a bit and in so doing it begins to lose some of its life-changing, life-shaping power.

Because whether you're currently living in the good of it or not, Christmas tells you, that in a specific place, at a specific time, God entered our world. And God the Son was born of Mary, wrapped in cloths, and laid in a manger. Which means that at the heart of Christianity is not, first and foremost, a philosophy, or a set of abstract moral principles, it's that in Christ God has humbled himself to the lowest place.

But what are you supposed to do with that? How are you supposed to respond to that? Well, that's why I want us to look at the shepherds this week, and the magi next week, because they have something to teach us - about joy and wonder and worship and witness.

The News That Comes
Look at v8-9: 'And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them.'

Now, read the gospels and the accounts surrounding Jesus birth, and it's the number and nature of angelic appearances that stand out, isn't it? It's like a portal's been opened between heaven and earth - with all of this traffic across it. At least, it should stand out. But if you've grown up in church, or been a Christian for a while, it might not stand out. In fact, it can be like water off a duck's back to you. I mean, it's Christmas, of course there are angels everywhere, that's what happens at Christmas!

But if you're not yet a Christian and you've grown up with a modern western materialist view of the world - where to quote the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, the world has become disenchanted, then talk of angels and anything beyond this physical world is the stuff of make-believe.

And yet, if that's you, even you sometimes wonder whether this material world really is all there is, don't you? At least, just occasionally something gets past your defences doesn't it? I mean, think for a minute about love - like the love you've felt over the last few days for friends or family, or wished you felt, and longed to feel. Is love really nothing more than the pre-programmed firing of neurotransmitters across your synapses, or is love for real?

Or think of a moment over the last few days, or before, when you were listening to some piece of music, or witnessing some spectacular view of nature, and just for a moment you felt like you touched, or were touched by, something above and beyond you. Are those moments of transcendence really nothing?

And so even in your own experience, or your own desires, you have this sense of something above and beyond our world - something that says love, transcendence, and beauty are real and not just chemical reactions. And so what if there was some connection between our world and that reality?

And what if that reality did break into our world and there was traffic across that portal? Then angels, and an enchanted world, at least begin to make sense, don't they?

Well, not if you're shepherds, I guess, because their reaction was also anything but water off a duck's back, wasn't it? You see, if our senses are numbed by years of disenchanted secularism, they've been numbed by 4-500 years of silence and *zero* traffic between heaven and earth. But now, like a volcano dormant for centuries, things are more than moving. Something's erupting.

Verse 9, 'An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.' Now, living in our social media age, modesty can seem a rare thing, can't it? Because today it's acceptable to draw attention to yourself, and glory in yourself, and invite others to glory in you.

But if you're a cynic, you might say, 'Sounds a bit like God to me' because he doesn't just invite you, he commands you to glory in him. And yet, read the Bible, and you realise, firstly, that it is presenting you with a God who is matchless in his glory - to whose glory nothing and nobody can compare. But secondly, there is nothing social media-ish about him. God is no Instagram God. In fact, public displays of his glory are rare.

And yet here, did you notice how Luke describes that glory shining, not *upon* them, or *at* them, but *around* them? And these men are enveloped by God's glory. And if displays of God's glory are rare, times when people are 360-degree surrounded by that glory are rarer still.

And yet, think, who is this rarer-than-rare event happening to? Well, that's the extraordinary thing, isn't it? Because there's this contrast between the shining glory of God, and those it's shining around. Between the glory itself and the anything-but-glorious people surrounded by it.

I mean, if you and I are not surprised by the presence of angels in the Christmas story, the same is true of shepherds, isn't it? Like the angels, they make an appearance every year. But for the average Jewish person of the time, that they are chosen to experience this would at least have raised an eye-brow. At worst it would have been shocking. Because when it comes to the glory of social status, shepherds were on the downward slide.

In fact, within a few years of this, their stock had fallen to the point that writers were describing them as lazy and untrustworthy, and you should never buy anything off a shepherd cos it's probably been stolen. And if you and I read Psalm 23, and get the warm tingles at David's description of the Lord as my shepherd, by the end of the first century rabbis were even questioning why God would ever describe himself as a shepherd.

So, if you were unlucky enough to find yourself on the bottom rung of the social ladder, you could always look down and think 'it could be worse, I could be a shepherd.'

So imagine a president, or prime minister making a state visit to another country, and as he or she descends the steps of the aircraft, there's the welcoming committee lined up to greet them. But imagine if, in place of the great and the good, the host country had scoured the streets and emptied the prisons, and lined up the most disreputable, untrustworthy, or just plain insignificant members of society to greet them? That would be saying something, wouldn't it?

And yet here, the angels don't go to Caesar in Rome, or Herod in Jerusalem, or to any number of all the other great and good they could have gone to to form the welcoming committee for the Son of God. Instead, they are sent to the bottom. They go to those beneath the bottom rung. And the glory of God shines around the least and the last.

Why?

The News That's Proclaimed
Look at v10: 'The angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be *for all the people*."' So while the good news of Christ's coming comes first to the shepherds, they're just the start, aren't they? Because this is for all people, in all places, at all times, down to us - here and now.

And the angel makes clear why: v11, "For unto you is born *this day* in the city of David *a Saviour*, who is Christ the Lord." And if angels and shepherds are like water off a duck's back - it would be easy to skip over 'this day' wouldn't it? I mean, of course it's happening today, it's Christmas Day. Except, in the New Testament, 'this day', 'today' is like an articulated lorry carrying all this freight and weight hidden inside. Because this isn't happening in some vague way, at some vague time - it's happening now, in your day, in your time - because *now* is the time of God's favour, and *today* is the day of salvation. Because *today* a saviour has been born.

Great, but who needs saving? I mean, imagine that you are dangling from a cliff face. And the ground is hundreds of meters below you. And you are holding on by your finger tips and your arms are tiring.

But suddenly someone abseils down from above and comes alongside you and says, 'don't worry, I've got you.' And starts strapping you to himself. How would you feel? Would you be relieved and grateful, or annoyed?

Well, it depends what you're doing there, doesn't it. I mean if you're an experienced climber and this is your usual Sunday afternoon climb, and you're harnessed and roped up and you're not in any trouble at all, this guy as a nuisance.

But if you're *not* a climber and you really *are* in trouble, you won't see him as a nuisance, you'll see him as a saviour.

So why do *all* people, from looked-down on shepherds, all the way to us, need a saviour, even if we resent that suggestion?

Well, when the angel appears to Joseph and tells him to take Mary as his wife he says the baby she is carrying "will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). And one of the most helpful ways to think about sin is to think in terms of what we do and don't do: sins of commission and sins of omission. Sins we commit by doing what we shouldn't do, and sins we commit by not doing what we should.

But here, as God's glory envelops the least and the last, not the first and the foremost, there's another dimension, isn't there? That we don't want to be the least and the last - we want to be the ones at the top, not the bottom, the first, not the last, the ones who everyone looks up to, not looks

down on, who get the attention and the praise. In other words, we want the glory for ourselves. The problem is, that hunger for our own glory can so warp our hearts that we're willing to do things, or say things, or just think things, that if others knew them, we'd be ashamed.

And so, there's an irony here, isn't there? Because while a self-focused pursuit of self-glory and self-fulfilment can push us up the social ladder, in reality it corrupts us and brings us down on the ladder of values and virtues that really count, that are really worthy of praise.

And so here, God's glory shines around those who know they have no glory - and the angel announces God's plan of salvation to rescue us from our distorted hunger for glory.

And yet, the baby being announced is not just a saviour, he is, v11, "Christ the Lord." Now imagine you are invited to the coronation of a king - with a front row seat. And you watch as the priest first anoints and then crowns the new king. For the rest of that day, in fact for the rest of forever, if anyone mentions 'the anointed one' you'd know exactly who they were talking about, wouldn't you.

And Christ means, '*the* anointed one' - *the* king. And so in choosing these shepherds, God has chosen those at the bottom to be the first to hear of the birth of the One truly at the top.

But what if you were one of those shepherds, and you heard all this? Wouldn't it be totally understandable to hear it and go, 'Great! Where can we find him? In the palace? In the super-expensive, fee-paying, private wing of that maternity clinic in Jerusalem where they give you a champagne breakfast the morning after? Cos, wherever it is, we're going to need to clean up first.'

And the answer? 'Er, no. You'll find him among all the mess.' Verse 12, "And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths *and lying in a manger*."

So if the glory of the Lord surrounds *them* - it's as if their life, and the stuff of their life, and the grime and mess of their lives, surrounds this newborn Christ the Lord, isn't it? Because he is laid in a manger their sheep probably feed from. And the One from outside our world, enters our world - their world. And they don't need to clean up before they go find him. They can go just as they are.

Several years ago a great grandson of Tsar Alexandra III, the last but one Russian tsar, died, but not in a palace or even as a prince. He died virtually unknown in a caravan park in a small town in the Australian outback. It was a poignant symbol for how far the Russian royal family had fallen. But Judah's royal family had also suffered just such a fall. And David's heir is born, not in a caravan park but a cattle shed. Verse 11, "For unto you is born this day *in the city of David*…" In Bethlehem, the place where David began his career as… a shepherd.

So, if these shepherds are of low social standing, think how much lower the Son of God has come. And yet, that's another reason why the angel and the glory have come to them, isn't it? Because listen to what Micah prophesied hundreds of years before: 'But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days… And he shall stand *and shepherd his flock* in the strength of the LORD' (Micah 5:2-4).

And through Ezekiel, the Lord had promised that because the civil and religious leaders of the day were happy to fleece the people not serve them, or feed them, he himself would come and shepherd them.

And so when the glory of God envelops shepherds and an angel tells them, a king has been born in the birthplace of David, Israel's shepherd - the message is clear isn't it? The greatest shepherd of all has come, and these men are given the honour of greeting one of their own.

And yet, this is Lord of all glory, the one in whom, as Paul says 'all the fullness of God dwells'. And he is dwelling in an animals' feeding trough. And he's doing it to save us from our hunger for glory. Which begs a question, doesn't it? How are we supposed to respond to this?

The News That Transforms

Look at the impact God's glory has on these men: v9, 'They were filled with great fear.' Ask yourself, what has the power to do that to someone? It's got to be something that threatens you hasn't it? Something so overwhelming, that you have no control over, that puts you in the way of an outcome you dread. Plus, if like these shepherds, you've been fed the line that you're worthless, you're always going to live in fear of the next bad thing that's coming for you.

And yet, the angel makes it clear, being enveloped by a glory far greater than anything you can conjure up on line, and that you have no control over, is not a reason for fear - but joy: v10, "Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy."

And these men get to live that transformation out, don't they? Because what they hear and then see moves them from fearing for their lives to overflowing with joy.

But Luke's not just telling you that to give you a nice story with a happy ending, is he? He's telling you because the same transforming power of the good news of the gospel is available to you. That the upside down message that glory surrounds the least, and the most glorious and greatest of all - Christ the Lord - became the least, has the power to turn your life upside down with joy and wonder and worship and witness.

And yet, if you look at these men, it doesn't come all at once, does it?

Firstly, look at their response. Verse 15, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, that the Lord has made known to us." And like them, if the good news of Christ is ever going to have any impact for good in our lives, then like them we have to engage with it.

And if you're not yet a Christian, like them it will mean investigating it. But also, just like them, you can come as you are. The fact that Christ is laid in a manger tells you, you don't need to get your glory hunger sorted, you don't need to clean up your act first before you come. It's Christ who lowers himself to us, not us who have to raise ourselves up to him.

Secondly, there's their effort: v16, 'And they went *with haste* and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.' So they don't dawdle, they don't say, 'I think this can wait until tomorrow.' They act, and act now, and act with energy.

So if the gospel is to change us we don't just engage with it, we apply ourselves to it. And the apostle Paul probably knew more about the life transforming power of Christ than any man. And think how often he describes the Christian life as a race to be run, or a struggle to be had, or a fight to win - and never as a sun-lounger on a beach. And maybe you look at your life and you don't see much joy or wonder or witness, but ask yourself, how's the running, struggling, fighting going? And are you applying yourself to the gospel even as it applies itself to you?

Thirdly, they speak… to others. Verse 17-18, 'And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.' Now, we're not told who they're talking to, but they're talking. And they leave others wondering and Mary pondering. And it's in rehearsing and repeating the story of the king who stoops so low for us - starting with this cradle but climaxing at the cross - that it sinks deeper in and joy begins to well up.

And if there's no such thing as a lone-ranger Christian, one reason for that is that we need each other to speak that news again to *our* hearts, and so stir our hearts in wonder and prompt us to ponder. And if we need that from others, others need that from us.

But fourthly and finally, they return to their fields: v20, 'And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.' So they don't have this great, joy-filled gospel of Christ experience and then run off to a monastery, or withdraw to some Christian community. They go back to work. But they go back glorifying and praising God.

And so it's God who gets the glory. But he gets it in the midst of their everyday lives. And as the truth of all that Christ has done for us sinks into our hearts, it'll fundamentally change whose glory were living for in our daily lives - at home, school, or work.

You see, when you've seen and pondered, and wondered at how God in Christ has humbled himself to save us - at Christmas and the cross - it deflates our glory-seeking ego. But it also lifts us up. It tells us, we really are in trouble on the cliff face and we need saving. But it also tells us we are so loved Christ comes to save us. And when that begins to sink in, like for them, it has the power to fill your heart with a rightly directed glory and praise.

But then what you discover is it's not just the shepherds who get surrounded by glory. As Paul makes clear to the Corinthians, we too get enveloped: 'And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another' (2 Cor 3:18).

So in the year ahead, engage with the gospel; apply yourself to it; speak of it; and then whatever you do, work at it for his glory, and wonder and worship and witness will increasingly fill your life.