

**Kirkwall Presbyterian Church**  
**'Shepherds'**  
**Luke 2:8-20**  
**December 21, 2025**  
**By Keith Marcy**

A literal description of a shepherd is someone who cares for sheep. As such, the Bible lifts them up as people who protect, guide, provide for, and care for the needs of their flocks of sheep or goats. However, on the other hand, they have a low place in society. Often, they lived a nomadic lifestyle, living in tents, moving as their flocks require new pastureland. Their personal hygiene was therefore compromised. Their children were educated according to the 4-H motto – *'Learn to do by doing.'*

The wool of a sheep and the hair of a goat have a sweet pungent odor. It is the kind of smell that gets right into your skin. While lanolin is great to make your skin soft and your clothing waterproof, in mixed, or polite company, the aroma clearly identifies your occupation.

Religiously, a shepherd was an outcast. There are times when not to work on the Sabbath would be classed as cruelty to animals. To most shepherds, the practice of ceremonial washing of hands would be a joke. That does not mean they were pagans. It seems that some Jewish shepherds had a clearer knowledge of the coming Messiah than those living in the ivory palaces in Jerusalem.

On the very night Mary delivered Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem, an angel appeared to a group of shepherds who were caring for their sheep in the fields outside of Bethlehem. Scholars and theologians generally agree that this was probably Gabriel, whom God sent with a message. This was the same angel who had appeared to Mary in Nazareth 9 months earlier, with the announcement, *"You will be with child, who will be called Immanuel – God with us!"*

But back to the shepherds in the field. Perhaps they had a small fire burning for a bit of warmth and to make a pot of tea. A few had crawled between the blankets. Suddenly...

*"An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified."*

What is the *'glory'* of the Lord like?

Back in the days of Moses, when the Tabernacle was completed in the desert, the Bible tells us the *'glory of the Lord filled it.'* It was several days before anyone could go near. It was bright!!

Here we read that the shepherds were *'terrified.'* This was not a fear to make them run. It was a deep reverence and awe of the scene before them.

The angel replied, *'Fear not.'* Exactly as he had said to Mary. He went on: *'I have good news that will bring great joy for the people of the world. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. Here is a sign for you – you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'*

Angels had appeared to other people over the centuries when God made a spectacular announcement. But now, something was about to happen that had never happened before or since. It was unique to this scene! The shepherds saw *'a great company of the heavenly hosts'* – in other words Heaven came down and they saw in. The angelic choir were saying, *'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.'* The event that had come to fruition in a stable in Bethlehem caused unbelievable rejoicing in Heaven. Jesus, God the Son, had stepped onto the earth!

We must pause here and consider the reaction of the shepherds. Although they were of the lower class in society, like Mary and Joseph, they had an understanding that a Messiah would one day come. How would they know that?

From the Old Testament prophecies. They had paid attention in Sunday School when faithful teachers had taught them. Or perhaps it may have been their parents or grandparents who taught them.

Note: they did not exclaim, "We don't know what you are talking about!" They knew the event they had witnessed which almost blinded them was a message from God, the Lord, Jehovah Himself. After the angel and the angelic host had vanished into the sky, they said to one another, *"Let us go into Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about!"*

They did not call for an environmental assessment, or an engineer's study or a meteorological investigation. Like Mary, they believed that God had made a profound announcement. They **believed** the angelic proclamation.

They did not say, “Let’s go and see **if** this happened.” They said, ‘*Let us go and see this thing that has happened!*’ The angel gave them one clue – “*You will find a baby wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger.*”

They set out. It was dark. But they saw the streetlights of Bethlehem over yonder???

Bethlehem was a small village.

There would be no streetlights.

Oh, they followed the star.

I saw it on a Christmas card.

The star appeared to wisemen 3,000 kilometers away.

The shepherds had no guiding star. They entered Bethlehem quietly, aware that Roman soldiers would be on patrol. King Herod would not risk a city full of Jews gathered without special law enforcement. Jewish revolts had occurred before. The shepherds stole in quietly listening for a baby’s cry, looking for a faint light, even the sounds of restless livestock. At last, behind the inn they found them. And the baby was in a manger on a mattress of dried grass. And they knew this was Him, the Savior, the Promised Messiah.

No doubt they related the scene of the angelic host to Mary, and the clue where they would find the baby. The text says, ‘*Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.*’ If she had any doubts – as 30 years later, John the Baptist would have from his prison cell – Mary may have wondered if this delivery room, lying on a bed of dried grass beside a burping milk cow and a defecating donkey, was all God could provide for the birth of His Son. Now she had the witness of these believing shepherds who were guided to them by the angel’s announcement, ‘*you will find Him lying in a manger.*’

Confirmation for Mary—this child you were carrying and who you just nursed *is the Son of God!* For Joseph—reinforcement that the message of the angel in his dream — “*do not be afraid to bring Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit*”— was true!

And what does the message of the shepherds say to us 2,000 years after the event? Through Luke's record, they speak to us: *"We heard the angel, we saw the heavenly choir, we searched and found Him exactly as the angel said,"* we met His mother and stepfather! We know He is the Messiah promised for many centuries. He is the Christ! He is the Savior! He will bring peace with God to all who believe! On our testimony, you can **believe!!!**

Many years ago, I attended a workshop for elders in Hamilton. During the wrap up discussion one person said, "I believe in Jesus, but I do not believe the virgin birth. Can I be a member of the Church?" The answer given was "Sure you can". That answer is wrong. If you deny the virgin birth you do not believe in the Jesus of the Scripture. The Jesus you believe in cannot save you because He is not the Son of God. He is not the one the shepherds found in Bethlehem's stable. He is not the One the shepherds went out and proclaimed on their way back to the hills.

But...But.. the Bible says many things about Jesus that are scientifically impossible! Yes, but God does not understand our word, '**impossible**'.

Just suppose for a moment that Joseph had found a room in the inn, or in a long-lost relative's house, or even in the local clinic of a midwife. He would have been born in surroundings like any other baby. But He was not born in the surroundings like any other baby, He was born in an animal shelter and placed in a manger for His bed. The plan of God. The angel said, *"this will be a sign..."* This is how you will know you have found My Son—He will be in a manger!! Oh, the wisdom of God, the grace of God, the marvelous leading hand of God!!!