Travel Light - Part Two

# The Visit

## (Luke 2:8-20)

Happy New Year. Last year we began a message series called Travel Light, talking about letting go of things that can hold us back in life. If you remember, we looked at Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem to register for the census, and for them it was the most inconvenient time because she was heavy with child. And so, today, on this first day of the New Year for many of us it’s a time of new beginnings. And we’re looking forward to what God has in store for us in the New Year, because we know that we can’t change the past, but we serve a God who can change our future.

And the funny thing about our past is that it doesn’t always stay in our past. In fact, sometimes it’s not funny at all, because if you’re like me, maybe you have done or said things that you wish you could take back, but you can’t. No matter what you do you can’t ever seem to leave it behind because the past doesn’t stay in your past. In other words, it keeps coming to the surface, it keeps shaping your future, it’s like one of those revolving doors that keeps coming up behind you. And so, you can’t slow down, you can’t turn around, because it just keeps pushing you forward, constantly reminding you of what is behind you.

Here we are on the first day of the New Year, 2023, and yet we are all too familiar with the guilt and shame of yesterday, because our spiritual enemy constantly reminds us of the past. And you wish you could take it back, but it’s in the past, you can’t undo it, you can’t go back, and so it continues to speak to you even today. That’s why Satan is called, “The accuser of our brothers,” because his servants whisper in our ears, making us feel unlovable and unforgivable because of what we have done (Revelation 12:10). And that’s what’s so exciting about Christmas and the start of the New Year is that we can close the door and we don’t have to listen to those lies anymore.

In other words, the coming of our Savior is a reminder that we died to sin, we’re no longer slaves to sin, it has no mastery over us, and so we don’t need to live in it any longer. All things have become brand-new, we are loved, we are forgiven, and so we not only close the door on the past, but we step into our future. God has saved us from our past so that we can step into the future that he has planned for us.

“Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

And so, as we turn to the Gospel in Luke chapter 2, I want to talk to you from the subject of The Visit.

Now that the commercialization of this one day that we have set aside to acknowledge the birth of Christ is behind us, I want to go deeper into celebrating the reality of what his coming means to us today. In other words, we’ve prepared 40 days for Christmas morning, and so we don’t want to overlook the significance of this one event, the coming of the One who is Immanuel, God with us. And so, in this series, we are going to look at the movement of people, situations, and circumstances around the coming of Jesus that are so often ignored because the spotlight is on the manger.

I don’t know about you, but as we step into this new year, it means so much to me that I have a good Shepherd. And so, the birth of Jesus, this baby wrapped in cloths and lying in the manger is of utmost importance. It overshadows every other event, but as an author, Luke is amazing because he doesn’t miss the events that are happening outside. He takes us deeper and gives us details that the other writers don’t, like the fact that God picked shepherds to proclaim the good news of Jesus birth.

In Luke chapter 2, verse eight, he tells us, “There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:8-12).

I believe this visit of angels to shepherds in the field is so important that we shouldn’t dare minimize it or trivialize it because it’s not irrelevant to the magnitude of the story even though it appears to be. Luke takes the time to point out that there were shepherds in the field. Not what kind of animals are in the stable, but away from the manger, out in the field there were shepherds. He tells us,

“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:13-14).

What draws my attention to this text is the fact that Luke has taken the time to tell us about this visit out in the field. He presents what appears to be an insignificant piece of information, almost as a footnote, that a great company of heavenly host appeared to “shepherds living out in the fields nearby" (Luke 2:8).

Now, it’s no wonder that all of heaven started praising God, because this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, this moment was not a trivial incident. Everything before this points to this moment because the Bible says,

“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).

And so, everything before this event pointed to it and everything after this event talks about it. Because this was the moment when the answer came to the question, the solution came to the problem, and the Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world stooped down and dwelt among us. That which is the same yesterday, today, and forever, has now marked our time, parting our calendar for time and eternity.

From a theological perspective we must understand the magnitude of this moment because the angels were praising God for something that they would never benefit from. They came to the shepherds in the field when they were without hope, when they were in trouble, when they were excluded from the worship in the temple and the promises of God. But it was to them that the host of heaven came declaring,

“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

It’s interesting to notice the priority of the gospel, because the angels didn’t go to Mary, they didn’t come to strengthen Mary, but they went to the shepherds in the field. In other words, they were sent to serve those who will inherit salvation, and so they went out to shepherds in the field where they announced the good news of what was happening in Bethlehem. You see, they needed them to know that the sheep they were watching over was just a shadow of the greater things that were happening in the stable. And so, Luke tells us in verse 15,

“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about" (Luke 2:15).

You see, none of the blood from the sheep the shepherds were caring for would ever resolve their sin issue. And so, they were watching the wrong sheep, because there is a Lamb whose blood would redeem them from the curse of the law, and from sin and death. What they would discover in Bethlehem was their reality, their sheep only represented who Jesus is, but when they looked in the manger they would see,

"The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

You see, we like the shepherds are included in the Christmas story, because God came to redeem us. It all started in the beginning, in the book of Genesis, and so this wasn’t an accident, it isn’t a mistake, because the child born in the manger was the Lamb of God. You see, the book of Genesis is more than a historical perspective of how our story started, it is really meant to reveal a glimpse of God’s plan for humanity.

In other words, we’re looking down through time at our own ancestry so that we can understand how we got here and what God is going to do through us. And so, this is more than just looking into the lives of these strangers. There is something significant that we need to learn about the angel going out to the shepherds in the field. We must recognize that God hasn’t just given us his word for information, but it’s for revelation,

“For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:6).

And so, as we turn to the book of Genesis, traveling back to the book of beginnings, reading it in that context we find that it becomes especially relevant, because we don’t serve a God who is surprised by anything that has ever happened. In other words, he doesn’t react, he acts, because he has the answer before you ask the question. He is the sovereign ruler of the universe, and all power is in his hand. And so, he was God before there was anybody to tell him he was God.

Now, when Satan rose up in rebellion against God’s authority, he was cast out of heaven, he fell from power, and was cast down into the earth realm where God gave man dominion. And so, Satan still seeking to rule, seduces humanity out of their position of authority by deceiving the woman, and tricking her into taking the one thing that God said not to touch. Genesis tells us,

“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it” (Genesis 3:5-6).

She also offered it to Adam and when he ate of it all humanity fell with him. Suddenly, Adam and Eve knew that they were naked and were ashamed. Just as their sin separated them from God, Adam separated fig leaves from the vine and made coverings for themselves.

“They hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you” (Genesis 3:8-9).

Adam was hiding from God, hiding behind his dead works, those dead leaves, because he had been alienated from God because of his disobedience. But God in his infinite wisdom assumes the responsibility of redeeming Adam.

“The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife” (Genesis 3:21).

And so, the first death recorded in the Bible was the Lord sacrificing an innocent animal as he covered Adam’s nakedness with the bloody skins of an animal chosen to be a substitute, a propitiation for Adam’s sins. This is important because we’ll never understand the deeper meaning of the shepherds in the field if we don’t go back to the beginning. We have to understand the fall of mankind in Genesis chapter 3 which resulted in our first parents being evicted from the garden, because it was the consequence of their disobedience that led them to be kept outside of the gates, out in the field.

In the same way, Luke tells us that the shepherds were out in the field, kept outside of the temple gates. And so, they were excluded from the ceremonies, the rituals, and the temple worship, because they were living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks” (Luke 2:8). But what’s really interesting about that phrase is that the sheep are not in the sheep pen, they are “living out in the fields.”

And so, Jesus tells us in John chapter 10 that the Good Shepherd keeps the sheep in the sheep pen where they could be protected from predators. The good Shepherd knows that sheep shouldn’t be left to graze at night and certainly not in the field where they would destroy crops, but that they should graze in the pasture. In fact, the Lord said speaking of the lost sheep of Israel,

“I will surely bring them together like sheep in a pen, like a flock in its pasture” (Micah 2:12).

And so, nobody wants sheep out in their fields destroying their crops at night. But Luke draws our attention to the fact that the shepherds were in fact out in the fields watching over their flocks at night. And so, let’s go back to Genesis chapter 4, because I believe there, we find the answer to why the shepherds were out in the field.

In chapter 4, Adam and Eve have been cast out of the garden, and Eve had now given birth to Cain and then to his brother Abel. And the Bible tells us in verse two, that the boys had grown and…

“Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil” (Genesis 4:2).

This is very interesting, because Cain was working the soil, working with the leaves that didn’t work to cover up his father’s mistakes. But Abel on the other hand kept flocks, and so he was a shepherd, he was working with God’s solution to his father’s problem. And that sets the stage for verse three, because the Bible says,

“In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord, but Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock” (Genesis 4:3-4).

And so, their parents had taught them how to worship God, and they came before the Lord to offer up the first fruits of their labor.

“The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor” (Genesis 4:4-5).

In other words, Cain offered up to God that which he got from the field, but Abel offered God a better sacrifice, because he offered a sacrifice from the pasture. He understood that,

“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22).

And God looked with favor on his offering because Abel was working with God’s solution, God’s answer to man’s problem, and when you value what God values, you will always find favor with God. And so, it’s not about how smart you are, it’s not about how well you sing, God said it’s all about the blood. He said,

“When I see the blood, I will pass over you” (Exodus 12:13).

And so, Abel offered a blood sacrifice and Cain offered something from the field. But God did not look with favor on Cain’s offering and verse five says,

“Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast” (Genesis 4:5).

“Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted” (Genesis 4:6-7).

But instead, Cain walks away mad and went to his brother Abel and said,

“Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him” (Genesis 4:8).

Now it’s all coming together. Now I understand why Luke tells us about the shepherd in the field. The angels visited with the shepherds in the field, because this was the revelation that we need.

You see, the sheep are just a shadow of what is happening in the stable, because they represent what Jesus is. This is a reflection of all that happened to Jesus, because not only is he the Lamb of God, but he is the Good Shepherd. And so, Luke is speaking prophetically, telling us that the shepherd is in the field, and if he had stayed in the pasture, he never would’ve been killed. It was only because Abel came over into Cain’s field, into Cain’s territory, that he was murdered.

Luke is telling us that Genesis chapter 4 was just a shadow, and that Jesus is reenacting what Abel did. Abel came into Cain’s field and Jesus the good Shepherd is coming into Satan’s field. You see, Satan has been given dominion over the earth realm. God cast him out of heaven and Jesus says not only will I run you out of heaven, but I am going to come onto your own territory, I’m going to meet you in the field. In fact, Jesus tells us that “the field is the world,” and so Cain who wouldn’t sacrifice a lamb for God, kills a man out in the field because he was a shepherd (Matthew 13:38).

Jesus comes down where Satan is, coming down through 42 generations, stepping down through the corridors of time to break the curse that was on Adam and the curse that was on Cain. And so, Jesus came to reverse what happened to Abel and the Bible promises that…

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Now, I know that Abel got killed and Jesus was killed, but Satan didn’t win because if you keep on reading the Bible says that when Jesus rose from the dead, “having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15).

And so, the angels came to announce to the shepherds that the Good Shepherd is in the field and “the night is nearly over; the day is almost here” (Romans 13:12). And that’s what Christmas is all about, it’s about the Shepherd in the field, because he couldn’t redeem you from heaven, and so he came down where you were and stepped down into humanity.

That is the good news of great joy, that is what the angels declared to the shepherds in the field. And so, verse 16 says, the shepherds hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them” (Luke 2:16-18).

It’s no wonder that the shepherds left their sheep, they had amazing news, because the shadows always recede in the presence of the real thing. The Lord is my shepherd,

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4).

Now I know why Luke mentions that it was while the shepherds were in the field, because while the shadow was in the field, the real thing came. He said, “I am the good shepherd, I am the gate for the sheep,” and John tells us,

“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:10-11).

And so, just like Cain killed his brother Abel when he came out into the field, when Jesus came into the field, his brothers, his own killed him too. Cain killing his brother was just a shadow of greater things. It started with Abel offering up a lamb to God and it resulted in Abel been offered up himself because he was a type of Christ. And so, it was his death that catapulted us from the shadow into the reality which is Christ.

That my brothers and sisters is the gospel of Jesus Christ, because everything else that would happen over the next several thousand years would only be a shadow of what God was going to do with man. The blood that was painted on the door post of the believer’s house in Egypt was just a shadow of the redemptive power of the blood of Jesus. And it’s here in the field just outside of Bethlehem that God reveals that the Lamb is only a substitute for the man. He himself is the propitiation for our sins, the Lamb is a substitute, the Lamb is the Son of God.

You see, God knew what he was doing before the foundation of the world. He told Satan, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers, he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). But he never said that redemption would come through the offspring of Eve, she was never meant to be that woman, because she was just a shadow of the woman. Later God found a young woman, a virgin, and he said,

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

And so, it happened just the way it was supposed to happen. Your life is not out of control, God is still in charge, he’s got your back, and all hope is not lost. The devil didn’t win this fight, it’s still going to come to pass, because the Good Shepherd is “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world. He who has an ear, let him hear” (Revelation 13:8-9).

Greater is he that is in you than he who is in the world. The battle belongs to the Lord, he is going to get the victory, and so whatever you lost, you were supposed to lose. Whatever you gave up, you were supposed to give up. It happened the way it was supposed to happen because Jesus said,

“Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Luke 9:24).

And so, we can’t stand around and worry about our plans, because we will never be saved by what we had in mind, we will only be saved by what God had planned for our lives. And so, whatever happens, we can trust that he’s going to fix it, because the battle is not ours, it belongs to the Lord.

As we bring this message to a close, we’re going to celebrate our victory in Christ, celebrating the Lord’s Supper together, and celebrating the new things that he has prepared for us in this coming year.

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