



BelPres Church

Reflection

Speakers: Dr. Scott Dudley, Rev. Annie Duncan and Alexis Ruhumariza

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Hello, BelPres, Merry Christmas. I hope you guys are having a great time together, whether you're with relatives or friends or whatever you're doing today. Just hope you're really enjoying the Christmas holiday.

We are gonna have a conversation between the three of us around a familiar Christmas text in the Bible.

We did this last year, and just something a little different, a little bit more informal, and just kind of having a conversation between us about what we see in this scripture.

And that will be sort of the sermon, but it will be coming a little differently. And this worked really well last year, so we wanted to do it again. And thank you for including us in your Sunday.

We're just happy to be part of what you're doing today, whether you're traveling or here or wherever you are. So I'm gonna open us in prayer and we'll start. So Holy Spirit, thank you for your word.

Thank you for what this season means. Thank you for what this holiday means. And Lord, as we have this conversation around Luke chapter two, just help us to help the three of us to say the things you would like us to say and all of us to hear from your word and be shaped and changed by it. Pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

So I'll read from Luke two. If you've got your Bibles at home, feel free to grab them. But Luke two starting in verse eight.

And 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 that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a savior has been born to you.

He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those whom his favor rests.

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.

So they 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 about this child. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, which were just as had been told.

So, yeah, so some observations that jump out to me in this text. And Alexis, talking before, we have some similar observations that the angel would appear to shepherds. I don't think we understand just how this is not expected, right? The shepherds were kind of outcasts. In some commentaries that I read, they were even, like, they were not considered a reliable witness.

So for God to appear to them and for them to spread this news of what happened is just so counter to how, you know, me, a human, would go about it.

What were some things that struck you as you read through this text, Alexis?

Yes, I think as I, as I read this one also, remember the angel came when the shepherd was in the night. So everywhere when you have the presence of the Lord, there was the darkness. The darkness moved and the light comes.

It seems like they were very afraid and they feel like, Oh, what's going on?

Because they expected, they see something different from the ordinary life they have been, the shepherd that they see.

And the presence of the Lord, whatever anywhere the presence of God is, if there is whatever way things you are facing, when there is a presence, there is a light. And the shepherd, they was, hmm.

I think probably, I'm not sure, I'm not speaking on them, but they feel like this is a favor.

Yeah, yeah.

This is a favor to us. To have this unexpected voice, the angel come to them, this is, that's the beginning of the good news. And then, that's beginning, who is it, Jesus?

Yep.

I think the whole text shows the range of who Jesus comes for, because the text starts, it's very carefully constructed.

The text starts in the reign of Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor, when Quirinius was governor, right? So, and then all the way down to shepherds, the kind of outcasts of society.

So I think that the text is kind of trying to cover, Jesus is for all of these people, the entire social spectrum. It's not just for the elite, it's not just for the down and out, it's for everyone.

I think there's something really beautiful about that and different than other religions. And this text is very careful to say, and Luke in general, the gospel of Luke in general, is saying, this includes everybody.

This is good news, not just for a group of people, not just for even Israel itself, this is good news for the whole world. I think that's one of the beautiful things about it.

Yeah, well, and even Jesus himself bridges that whole spectrum, like Jesus is Lord, Jesus is King, and later on in Luke 15, he calls himself the Good Shepherd. And so he bridges that whole spectrum as well, which I hadn't even thought about until you just said that. Yeah, yeah, that's really neat.

And Pastor Alexis used that something also, they're just going about their business. And I think this text, we're so familiar from Charlie Brown, I think we miss a lot of some stuff in there.

And just that point that they're just doing what they're normally doing, right? They're just going about their business. And there's this contrast between this incredibly heavenly event, right?

You get these angels and they're singing and God himself is coming to earth. There's all of that. And then there's just the ordinariness of shepherds in a field just doing what they do every day.

And I think there's something there about, God steps into the mundane. When God comes, he doesn't like come in some... When people are doing some big holy thing, right?

They're not in worship. They're not in church. He steps into our ordinary life where we are just doing ordinary things.

Yes.

I think also when I can see the ship, they were faithful. I think it's teaching us, whatever any way God called you, just stay connected. Stay faithful.

Because the God is able to meet with you anytime, anywhere, even with anyone. Because the reason why is they was doing very busy, doing exactly what they called to do. And also what things teach to me about is the humbleness of Jesus.

Can you imagine someone from the heavens? He chooses himself. He uses the message of changing the world to speak.

God sent to speak from the shepherds, someone like who may not recognize in the society, who doesn't have the value, who doesn't feel belong even. But Jesus, He chooses to manifest through them. That shows humbleness.

It is the key. Not to be proud. I know sometimes we are living in society where everyone, I'm so proud, right?

Is that make sense? But I think this is a message of Jesus telling us there is a good news. We have to, that's number one, our priority.

Their faithfulness and their obedience, right?

Because they immediately, even though they were doing their job, tending the flocks at night, right? But they leave that and immediately go, let's go see what has happened. And, you know, we talk about this a lot, but like, Jesus was so humble.

God orchestrated this and he was born in a manger. If he had been born in a great palace, I wonder if the shepherds would have been like, we can't go there. We can't, like, they won't let us in.

So, it's so interesting that they immediately are able to obey what the angels said because they knew, we can go there. We can, they'll let us in a manger, right?

Yes.

Yeah.

And that line there, just as you were reading, I never thought of it before, but just as you're reading it, that we're so used to this text again, that we skipped by it, but that line after the angels sing and everything, let us go see, that's not necessarily a normal response. Right? Like we- What just happened?

I mean, that's not, you put yourself in their place and it's actually happening. I'm not sure my response would have been, let's go see, let alone fear not, right?

Fear not, this big scary angel says.

Don't worry. But let us go. I mean, they could have had a number of responses in that moment.

Like what just happened or did we see something, but let us go immediately.

And then the other piece of that is that meant that they had to leave the flock of sheep by themselves.

Like unguarded, unprotected sheep, they could have lost all their sheep. I mean, like if you just think about this from our own perspective, like this is leaving the most important meeting that you've ever had at work, right?

This is potentially putting at risk your entire life savings. This is like it's a big deal to leave sheep out in the open at night. Sheep are notorious for wandering off, getting lost, there's predators.

So I think, you know, let's leave everything we've got, risk everything we've got to go see this thing is not necessarily the response that you would expect.

Yeah.

Yeah.

I think that's a good... I like when the angel told them, because it seems like they say, don't be afraid. I bring the good news for all the people.

This is the beginning of the good news. It is the foundation for the message Jesus has given to each and every one. I bring the good news.

Don't be afraid. I think this is a message, whatever any things you are afraid for. When you have the good news of Jesus, you should not be afraid.

And the second one, I like the way they just learn quickly. As you mentioned about Pastor Scott, I love that comment, is they left everything. You can see how much they were very connected to the ship.

They were very connected. It's like one time Pastor Scott can say, oh, I just leave the church. You have been many years here.

That can be very, very, and maybe God call you to go to the Congo or Rwanda or somewhere.

That can be hard for you, because how much you love the congregations, how much you connect to the congregation, how much you feel yourself, the things God have been walked through with you. And them, they feel this message, are we not?

They're gonna live it. Because they choose to trust the message of God more than what they have. They feel having the good news.

And then they love the way they were. When they went quickly, this is what they did. They told the Mary what they saw, what the angel told them.

I like it. When they come back, they was amazing and excited and excited. And they will feel like, oh my goodness.

They feel like, actually, these people, the ship, this is the beginning, the message of evangelization.

Yeah, yeah.

Because they talk about Jesus. Listen, this is what we saw.

This is good news.

This is the good news.

Yeah. And to your point, Annie, if Jesus had been born in the palace, they would have been too intimidated to, not only to go and see, but to share the good news and all of those things.

Yeah. Yeah. And there is this great sacrifice that they're leaving behind their life's work, right?

But you don't get it in the text that they're considering it a sacrifice. And that's come up so much for us, especially this fall, in talking about Unleashed and how do you know when you are living sacrificially?

When you are obeying God, there's so much joy that often it doesn't even feel like a sacrifice because you're just so faithfully obeying what you feel like God is saying.

And there's just, Unleashed Joy is the word that keeps on coming up right this fall and winter.

Yeah, and I think that's part of how also why, I mean, Jesus is so approachable. And he comes to be in this form, to be approachable. And I think that also is what alleviates the fear.

I think that's also where it's, when you step into sacrifice, you feel like, he's got me. He's got me. He's got my back, so I don't need to be afraid.

I can leave my sheep, because I trust him. Because he wasn't born in a palace. I might have been suspicious of him, but he's born in a stable.

This is just a nerdy little seminary thing. I've always found there's something about the fact that they're shepherds, again, lowest of the low, testimony not admissible in court. Even though throughout the Bible, David is considered a shepherd.

There's this mixed message in scripture, where culturally they were the lowest of the low and yet constantly being lifted up in the Bible.

David's a shepherd, Jesus is a shepherd, but Jesus is also called the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Referring to the Old Testament temple sacrifice system, where you sacrifice usually a lamb. To atone for our sins.

And so I always hear, we now have the lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world. Will be the sacrifice to take away the sins of the world. And it's shepherds who raise lambs that the announcement comes to.

And they are just six miles from Jerusalem. And so it's quite possible that some of the sheep they were raising would have been used in the temple sacrifice system. Would have been the lambs that got sacrificed in the temple.

So I don't know what to make of that, but it's just a nerdy little Bible thing that I think is just kind of interesting. I think, Annie, you sort of talked about this year.

And I think this text does resonate with where we've been in a couple of ways, BelPres, throughout the journey of this year. We started with prayer and fasting for 25 days to hear God. I mean, the shepherds hear God.

And they respond. And then we took the input that came out of that from several hundred of you on the Day of Discernment. And our elders prayed and fasted and kept trying to hear God, where are you calling us?

And then landed on the eight projects we've talked about. And many of you stepped in in obedience. You left some of your sheep.

You left some of your time. You left some of your money. You left some of your influence.

And brought it to what Jesus wants to do, in obedience to the call. And I think this text gets at some of where we've been on this journey this year. And the result is unleashing people, unleashing others.

We get unleashed from the things that are kind of hanging, that we're kind of hanging on to, that hang on to us, and unleashing joy for other people. And I think that abandon that the shepherds experience, I don't care.

I'm willing to leave it behind.

I think many of you have experienced, and others of you are praying about stepping into that surrender, so that you can experience what happens when you do leave the sheep behind, trusting God, saying, I trust him for that.

I'm going to be doing what he's calling me to do, to be part of the good news that is coming. So I think this is in some ways a great scripture that recaps some of where we've been as a church over the last year.

Yeah, and just even going back to kickoff, we were saying before we started recording this, we've combined with New Hope more times since September than I think we ever have before.

In our modern service.

In our modern service, and there's great joy in that.

Your congregation is asking for more of that. Say what you said about being one church. They're like, we're one church.

Yeah.

So I can see since the time I've been here, the BelPres, God have been doing incredible. When it's come last year, this year, and I see there's sometimes, you know, the pastors, the kind of feel sometimes you are pushing someone to do some things.

But this year, it was not, it was very different. It was very different. I had a lot of members, the leaders, they feel this is awesome.

What God is bringing our church. Is bringing our church means you see, God is talking to each, everyone's. God called us to build this kingdom.

How can we experience, not just the heavens, to experience the kingdom here. As always, we do things together. It helps us to see the scripture very different. It helps our character grows. It helps us to leave some of our own comfort zone. Leave some of our ship.

Can you remember the ship? They leave the ship. That's obedience.

Obedience doesn't always required. It required sacrifice. It required to see something different.

That's why the ship that they was really obey, they feel we love this ship, but we gonna leave it. So this year, we see God have been transforming our church. It is very different.

We see God use the prayer. We see, I think Pastor Scott, can you imagine 24 hours in the prayer in the first thing? Is that right?

We had that one. Because we know without prayer, there's nothing will happen. We see our God have been shaped our church in a very different...

One of the things I can see this year, the library, now is the prayer room. Every time when I come to this prayer room, I just remember the library. How was I feel?

Wow, this is something we... Something have been connected to some of the members for so long. Now, they decide to give the prayer.

This is how much God is moving our church. When you pray, things change.

Yeah. There's a pastor I know that says, time spent in prayer is never wasted. It's never wasted.

That's you. You're the pastor that says that.

Yes. Any time you spend, even just a second. This is how, when we pray, it gives us humbleness to say we are not our own.

God is in control. And he's pulling our pride down and bringing the good news. If you want to bring the good news, oh my goodness, our church God has been doing incredible.

New Hope, BelPres, Sanctuary, Modern. Let me tell you, oh my goodness, this is the season of good news to bring the message of Jesus. Amen.

Amen.

Amen.

And we've had a lot of people from New Hope become members of our church. I mean, over the last year, we've seen a lot of people from New Hope become members of our church, which is just awesome.

And you were talking earlier about, in fact, on our last congregational meeting, the reason we made quorum, which we haven't made in years, is because so many New Hope members were there to help us make quorum.

So that's just on a very Presbyterian level. That's been super helpful. You know, one of the things we said was, you know, the text starts with Caesar Augustus and shepherds, and just all kinds of people are invited to this party.

You had some comments just around what we saw on our 70th anniversary party.

Yeah, which was so overwhelming, like in such a good way. You know, we invited everybody to go to the lobby after all of our services.

And, you know, we sang Happy Birthday to BelPres, but just seeing that lobby so full, I can't even talk about it without weeping. It was just a glimpse of what that church in 1955, BelPres, when it started, what they were praying for.

And there's this really beautiful just, we had a photo booth, and our creative team let the camera roll with every snapshot. And you just got to see all of these people, Sanctuary, Modern, New Hope, SCCC, all together there.

And it's just this beautiful picture, literally a picture, of who we are becoming, and who we're gonna become more of in our next 70 years. So, it's encouraging.

It's super exciting. Yeah, to see the church, and those pictures are great. You see just Chinese and African and young and old, and everyone in between, and it's just, it's the family of God.

So, it's cool. It's been a good year, BelPres.

Yes.

So we will keep moving forward.

That's another thing this pastor says. And we're excited to keep moving forward with you, BelPres. So, thank you for jumping in on this conversation this morning.

I'm going to close us in prayer.

Yes.

Awesome. Jesus, we thank you that you are our Lord, you are our King, you are our good shepherd.

Yes.

And so, Jesus, as we step into this new year, 2026, help us to hear your voice, help us to follow you, help us to become more like you, help us to go to you in prayer, because time spent in prayer is never wasted.

So, Jesus, we just continue to submit ourselves to you, to commit ourselves to you. It's only through you that we can become unleashed. So, unleash us from the things of this world and leash us to you, Jesus, because we want to be your disciples.

So we give you the rest of 2025 and we give you all of 2026, and we ask that you just fill us with your spirit as we go from here. It's in your name that we pray, amen.

Amen. Hallelujah.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or community group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What are some key take aways for you?
- How might you respond this week?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Take the challenging parts of your conversation to Jesus. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.