

**Theme:** Characters of Christmas

**Message:** What a Glorious Night! – Luke 2:8-20

**Aim:** Consider the shepherds who were told of Jesus' birth.

**Intro:** The song our Christmas choir is singing next Sunday is titled "What a Glorious Night," which briefly tells of the shepherds who were visited by the angel who announced the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ. I thought it a fit sermon title for this morning because as we consider the characters of Christmas, we will look at the shepherds today. Luke 2:8-20 [READ]. Have you ever wondered why shepherds were the 1<sup>st</sup> ones to be told of the Messiah's birth? Ever wonder why Jesus was born in Bethlehem? Ever wonder why a manger instead of a house, w/a bed? Let's explore the story of the shepherds more closely. 1) **Generally speaking, shepherds were social outcasts.** The Israelites started out as nomadic people, & keeping sheep/goats was a common way of life. Abraham had many flocks & prospered as a nomadic shepherd. Of course, King David started out as a shepherd. But it seems that as they settled into the Promised Land & became agricultural, shepherding gradually lost its appeal & shepherds lost their status. Ryan (didn't catch last name), of "Short Daily Devotions," wrote, "[Most Jews of that time] would find it incredulous that God would invite shepherds to witness the Messiah as a newborn, expecting instead political leaders like Caesar or Herod or religious leaders such as the Pharisees. [Shepherds] were poor, uneducated, uncultured, and uncouth. If you were with your family walking through town you would go to the other side of the street to avoid them. They were the rough characters on the fringe of society...so much so that their testimony was not even admissible in court. Also, shepherds were religious outsiders. Because their work was considered ceremonially unclean, they were not allowed into the temple courts or to be an active part of temple worship." As a matter of fact, according to what is known as the Jewish Mishnah, shepherds weren't allowed to keep their sheep anywhere but the wilderness – except in a special case. In the words of John Macdonald in an article entitled "But Why Shepherds?" the

Jewish Mishnah was “a collection of documents recording oral traditions governing the lives of Jewish people during the period of the Pharisees. As such, an understanding of the *Mishnah* gives us insight into how Jewish people lived during the time of Jesus. One regulation in the *Mishnah* “expressly forbids the keeping of flocks throughout the land of Israel, except in the wildernesses—and the only flocks otherwise kept, would be those for the Temple-services. [However,] Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and the surrounding fields were *not* in the wilderness where ordinary flocks of sheep were kept. Therefore, according to the Jewish regulations, the flocks under the care of the shepherds near Bethlehem must have been for the Temple-services. These shepherds watched over sheep destined as sacrifices in the Temple at Jerusalem. Rabbinic sources indicate that certain fields at Migdal Eder (lit. “watchtower of the flock;”) southeast of Bethlehem were reserved year-round as places where animals that were intended for temple sacrifice were raised.” According to a Dwight Longnecker, “The Jewish historian Josephus, writing in the first century, records that at Passover up to 265,000 lambs would be sacrificed in the Jewish temple at Jerusalem. Those lambs had to meet the strict legal-religious regulations of the Jewish faith. They had to be no more than one year old, male and without spot or blemish. Therefore, they had to be born in controlled conditions and inspected for birth defects before being raised in protected conditions. Where did they get that many lambs? The law also said that animals to be sacrificed had to be born within five miles of Jerusalem. Bethlehem is five miles from Jerusalem. The hillsides around Bethlehem, therefore were a first century lamb factory farm. When the lambs were born, they were wrapped up in strips of cloth to protect them and placed in a stone feeding trough in the birthing barn until the priest could come by and inspect them.” So, II) **The Shepherds who were visited by the angel were no ordinary shepherds.** Amber Backus wrote, “Pharisees needed shepherds to raise spotless lambs for sacrificial sin offerings. So, the shepherds we read about in Luke 2, were actually fulfilling **temple duties**. They were not

second-class or untrustworthy. They were shepherds appointed by the temple for the temple. The only ones who could carry out temple duties were **these** shepherd-priests. They served in the fields on the outskirts of Bethlehem at a place called Bethlehem Ephrathah (Micah 5:2). This is where the sacrificial lambs for the Passover Festival and Feast were cared for (Exodus 12:1-30). Aside from Mary and Joseph, these men were the first eye-witness admirers and worshipers of God incarnate (Luke 2:15-18). They were the first to gaze upon the baby who would one day wash them clean and erase the need to raise sacrificial sheep offerings anymore.” The Savior would put them out of a job! Jon Welch also wrote: “The shepherds who kept the royal flocks of Bethlehem weren’t your ordinary shepherds; they too were special and set apart. These unique shepherds were what they called “Rabbinical” or priestly shepherds. They were familiar with the Old Testament writings, they had been educated in the Law of Moses, and most importantly, the shepherds were trained with special skills to keep the Temple lambs unblemished—perfect and spotless in every way. Immediately following their birth, the shepherds would meticulously look over and inspect the lambs making sure they were flawless and without fault. The shepherds would then wrap the perfect lambs in swaddling clothes, certifying their birth was a “holy birth.” This outward, physical display of cloths wrapped securely around the lambs meant they were deemed an acceptable sacrifice.” Bethlehem was “the city of David,” which is why Joseph took Mary there. A decree had been made by Caesar Augustus (not Julius) that all the Roman Empire had to be registered (so that they could be taxed – oh joy!). They had to register in the town of their lineage & since Joseph was in the lineage of David, he had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, even at the time when Mary was ready to deliver the baby! From Nazareth, they would have passed thru Jerusalem & the temple. I wonder if from Jerusalem to Bethlehem they might have passed by the Tower (watchtower) of the Flock (Migdal Eder), where Passover lambs were born & cared for. If so, perhaps Joseph remembered it when they found no room to spend

the night, or perhaps they were directed there by someone noticing their plight. But it was no coincidence! Jesus was born in the same town & I believe the same place – the tower of the flock – where sacrificial lambs were born. So, III) **Those Shepherds understood what the angel said.** When the angel (not given a name, but I believe Gabriel) said, ***“Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord (the Messiah);”*** when he said, ***“And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths & lying in a manger,”*** the shepherds would have recognized that as exactly what they did w/the lambs chosen for sacrifice. The manger used was most likely a stone trough, used for fodder, yes, but also used to place the lambs in, after wrapping them tightly to protect them from injuring themselves. The manger would have been a tight place where they couldn’t thrash about, to their harm. Again, Jon Welch wrote: “Jesus was therefore born in the same place and at the same time with the same treatment as the lambs that would be sacrificed. The shepherds knew they were not going to see just any baby. They were going to see the newborn Lamb of God. That’s why they worshipped him. They knew he was the promised Messiah, the Suffering Servant, the Lamb of God.” No wonder the shepherds “went w/haste” – they knew just where to go – & “found Mary & Joseph, & the baby lying in a manger.” No wonder they couldn’t keep quiet about what they had heard & seen in the fields. ***“They made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.”*** No wonder they returned to their flocks, ***“glorifying & praising God for all they had heard & seen, as it had been told them.”*** They couldn’t worship God in the temple, but they couldn’t keep from worshipping Him now. Now, I should offer a disclaimer w/this message today. Not all will agree w/my take on things. The tour guides in Israel certainly don’t talk about Migdal Eder. There is a site in Bethlehem which is considered the very birthplace of Jesus. It’s marked w/a shrine & w/a church built upon the site. I could very well be wrong, as could those whom I’ve

cited today. But God does nothing by happenstance. John the Baptist, whose father Zechariah was the character we looked at last week, identified Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Micah the prophet wrote about Migdal Eder (tower of the flock) & Bethlehem Ephrathah 700 years before Jesus was born. The Jewish Mishnah was formulated around 200 yrs before Christ was born. The rabbinic shepherds were out in the field that night. All of those seemingly random details came together at the birth of Jesus. Of course, God knew just what He was doing! Oh, what a glorious night! He knows what He is doing in your life, too! Look to Him, surrender to Him, trust Him, obey Him, worship Him. Embrace His Christ. There is no other way, no other name by which we can be saved but Jesus.