

Christmas Eve 2019 readings

The innkeeper

Sure, I remember that night. It was right in the middle of the busiest run we've ever had.

The emperor Augustus had commanded that all of his subjects be counted – and counted in their hometown at that – and so *everyone* was coming back to Bethlehem, looking for a place to stay.

A lot of people stayed with family in town, but if they didn't have family or if they had *too much* family, then a guy like me could clean up. And boy did I ever. *So* many people wanted a room – talk about peak pricing! (makes chef's kissy fingers). I crammed them in as best as I could.

But that one night, something happened that I'll never forget. A road weary couple appeared at the door to see if I could squeeze them in. My immediate response was – no way! There's no way I could fit them in – we already had people triple booked – but something about them made me think that I should make them room. Partly it was that she was super pregnant, and I'da been sleeping in the doghouse if my wife heard I turned her away, so I invited them in and gave them a place alongside our animals. It was the best I had but at least it was something.

And while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born and she gave birth to a boy, her first born son. She took strips of cloth and wrapped him up and laid Him in the manger because, well, where else was she going to lay him? It's not like they had a pack-n-play cradle to lay him in.

And that's when things got a little weird. I took some water to them and some blankets and when I did, I couldn't help but stare at this child. He was... mesmerizing. Captivating. Even with his hair matted down against his head he was a handsome baby – and so I asked the father 'what's his name?'

'Jesus,' he replied. 'Because he will save his people from their sins.'

Hoo-boy, I thought. A religious nut. (laughing a little) – save his people from their sins. Sure buddy I thought.

But then the weird things started happening. I couldn't sleep and I got up to look out the window. And, there, in the sky, was this bright light, illuminating the countryside. And I know this is going sound crazy, but there was this sweet sound in the air, almost like... I don't know... angels singing. It was incredible.

And then people started knocking on my door. I went to open it, thinking, there is absolutely no way we can fit anyone else in, and yet, there at the door, were a bunch of shepherds – hooks and crooks and all. They looked at me a little sheepishly and said 'Do you by any chance have a baby in the house, lying in a manger? We heard these angels in the field saying that the Saviour was born – we're trying to find him and you're the last place on the block.'

Well, normally, if a bunch of shepherds showed up at my door, babbling about a Messiah, I'd have kicked 'em to the curb. You can't trust a shepherd – their goat's milk's just a little too ripe if you know what I mean – and yet here in my house – in the town of David - was a child in a manger, named 'he will save his people from his sins' and a group of people looking specifically for him.

I took a step back and let them in.

They brushed past me and immediately saw the child and they fell on their faces – laughing, crying – I’m not sure which. They were clearly moved by what they were seeing. They kept talking about David and the promise God had made and this child – they seemed to think that he was a king – and I guess if his folks had come back to Bethlehem to be counted, they would belong to that line. But why would a king be born in a manger?

About a half an hour later, they poured out into the street, singing songs to one another, singing songs to praise the Lord. They raised such a racket – it was unlike anything I’d ever seen.

And then, not long after, more people at my door. They’d heard the shepherds’ song. They’d had the shepherds stop at their door, looking for the baby in the first place, and all of a sudden, all of Bethlehem seemed to descend on my home. They all wanted a glimpse at this ‘new born.... king?’ (*says it as if he’s unsure if he believes it*).

And I have to admit, when I looked into his eyes, he seemed to me to be more than a baby in the manger. He did seem majestic... destined for greatness... and yet, here he was, swaddled in cloth and laying in a manger.

I’ll tell you what though. It really made me step back and look at my life – reconsider what I was living for. I’ll never forget what one grizzled old shepherd said – he looked like he hadn’t spent a day inside all his life – and yet he left, tears streaming from his eyes and said ‘meeting Jesus changes everything.’ I have a feeling he’s right. I want to find out more.

O little town of Bethlehem (4 vs)

The shepherd

When you live out in the fields for most of your life, you get used to the unexpected. But nothing could have prepared me for what happened that night.

My crew and I – mostly sons and neighbours – were living out in the fields around Bethlehem, keeping watch over our flocks that night. It wasn't easy work and it didn't win us no favours with the city folk, but it was a living. We had a pretty big herd of sheep and it took the lot of us to keep an eye on 'em. At night though, you could stop and get some shut eye. We'd take turns staying up through the night, making sure the sheep didn't wander off.

That night, I'd just finished my turn on guard and was settling in for a long winter's nap. I gathered up some grass to lay my head on and closed my eyes. Only to sit bolt upright when a blinding light flashed across the sky. All of us immediately jumped to our feet to see what it was and then immediately fell on our faces. There, right before our eyes, was an angel of the Lord. No word of a lie – an angel right there in front of us.

We were terrified. Nobody lives to see an angel and tells about it. Certainly not a bunch'a ruffians like us.

And then the angel spoke – its voice soft but powerful – like a ewe calling her lamb. It said:

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.
11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

Now listen – I wouldn't call myself a religious man, but I knew enough from my mother's knee to know what he meant – a king like David had been born. A deliverer had come. After all these years... (*stare off wistfully for a moment*).

Anyways, that WAS good news. And it *would* bring great joy! 'But how would we find him?' we thought. And as if on cue, the angel continued.

12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luk 2:10-12 NIV).

Well now that doesn't seem right. A Saviour born of David doesn't get born in a manger. He gets born in a palace.

And yet, as if to jolt me out of my disbelief, the angel was suddenly accompanied by a whole host of angels – heaven's armies arrayed to announce the king.

And with a voice that echoed across the hills they praised the Lord, singing – (*sing "Glo—r-ia In excelsis Deo" – or omit*) 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." (Luk 2:14 NIV).

And just as quick as they'd come, they were gone. And it was just us, staring across the fire at one another, the sheep softly lowing in the background as if nothing had happened.

But something HAD happened. What had happened?

We looked at each other. "That wasn't a dream was it?" I asked. My oldest son pinched me. "Nope, not a dream."

My youngest said – "Well, we gotta go! A new king? A new David? This I gotta see!"

(shakes his head). "We can't go to see him" I said. "We're farmhands, not high-falutin' governors. He won't want to see us." I couldn't believe his gall.

But then my eldest said "We gotta go dad. They wouldn't a told us if they didn't want us. Don't you recall – laid out in a manger wrapped up in cloths. That sounds like us."

I stopped to think. No king in his right mind would let a shepherd see his son – we couldn't even testify in court let alone enter the palace – and yet these angels had appeared and told us whereabouts to find him.

My neighbour agreed – "You go, we'll watch the sheep. We'll go after you, if you find anything."

Against my better judgment we went.

But then - how d'you find a baby in a town the size of Bethlehem? My youngest found a way. He started banging on doors. "Is there a baby here? Is there a baby here?" I scolded him. "You can't just knock on doors and ask if they'd just had a baby." And yet he kept going until the last house on the row. More an inn really.

He knocked on the door and a tired looking man came forward. He tried to hide the disgust on his face when he saw we were shepherds but my son ploughed on –

'You don't by any chance have a baby in the house, born tonight, lying in a manger, do you? We heard these angels in the field saying that the Saviour was born and we're trying to find him.'

You could tell by the look on his face that we'd found him. The innkeeper slowly opened the door to us and led us in. There, by the manger, lit with candles, was the boy. The son of David. The king. God had kept His promise.

I swallowed hard, a tear forming on my weathered cheeks. My grandfather had always told me that a king would come – a son of David who would put things right – and he told me about

these legendary heroes – David, who slew a giant; Solomon, wise and rich; Hezekiah who kept his people fixed on God, and God delivered them from a whole army. Well he told me that God would do it again, and give us a king and deliver us from Rome. It hit me like a brick – THIS was the king. The king who would save us. The king who would redeem us. I dropped to my knees and sobbed. Well, I cried and I laughed and I praised the Lord that I should be privileged to see such a beautiful child.

And then it struck me - *I* was one of the first to see this child. This king. *Me!* Not a king, not royalty, not higher ups. Me, the bottom of the barrel. A downright nobody. The first people this king summoned to his side were outcasts.

And I swear, he flopped his little head over towards me and opened his eyes, and for a brief moment, I looked into the eyes of God. Grace, love, mercy, acceptance. That washed over me like a flood. Nobody cared about me before. Nobody worried about me. And yet, this child made me felt loved. Valuable. Like I belonged in God's world.

We sat a while longer and then went out to tell the people around all that we had heard. On the way out the door though, I stopped and looked that innkeeper right in the eye. "Meeting Jesus changes everything" I said. "I thought no one loved me, but now I know that God does."

Angels we have heard on high

The king

(From the hall) All rise for the honourable, the majestic, the awe-inspiring, the merciful King Herod the Great. *(Enter)*. Please be seated.

I can't believe that anyone else would have the audacity to call themselves king. Pfft. I'll show them. There is no king but me. King Herod – the honourable, the majestic, the merciful - the Great.

I've worked hard for this kingdom. With my own sweat and blood, I've clawed my way to the top, no matter the cost and now I sit on this throne. Sure, I made some compromises with Rome and sure I murdered much of my family, but hey, who hasn't? And besides, who needs children when you can have subjects? All of Judea bows to my will.

All except for that baby. *(bitterly)*

It was not long ago that those Magi appeared at my court looking for the newborn king of the Jews. You know those easterners – always got their heads in the clouds, searching the skies. Almost as bad as shepherds. They said that they had seen his star and that they had come to worship him.

The audacity! The nerve! There is only one king who should be worshiped and that's me! And if there was a new heir to inherit my throne, trust me, I'd know it.

But listen, I didn't work my way up to the top by brute strength alone; sometimes you gotta massage things a little – play the long game – work the system to get what you want. You get more flies with honey, you know? So I said "A newborn king eh? Well let me find out more so that I too can go to worship him."

I sent them a way for a few days and had my scribes look over the ancient texts to see what they said and sure enough they said "The baby will be born in Bethlehem for out of you will come a shepherd of my people."

Well, hmpf. These people don't need a shepherd; they need a shearer. They need someone to fleece them and I'm that someone. And no baby will challenge me for that.

So the wise men returned to me and I said to them - "Go to Bethlehem and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and worship him. I would very much like to give him what he deserves" (Mat 2:8 NIV).

Well, off they went, but then, days, weeks, months went by and no word from those duplicitous philosophers. Those treacherous fools used MY resources to find the kid and then kept him hidden from me. The nerve.

I showed them. I showed them the lengths I'd go to protect I pride. I gave orders for every child two and under to be murdered in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Nobody threatens my rule. I'm the king around here. I make all the decisions.

This baby changes nothing. I'm in control and I am everything. I am the master of my own affairs. I am Herod the Great. I mean, that's why you're here tonight, isn't it? To celebrate my glory and remember my marvellous deeds, all these years later? I'm what you're here for, aren't I?

What child is this?

Mary

Growing up, we heard the stories of Rahab and Ruth - outsiders who believed and became the ancestors of King David. We heard the stories of Sarah and Rebekah - how God miraculously enabled these barren women to have children. We knew how God could work through faithful women.

I would never have expected to join their ranks.

I mean, I was just a kid, spinning wool in my father's house, when the angel appeared before my eyes. Let me tell you - nothing can prepare you for that - an angel - poof - out of nowhere - a messenger sent from the very presence of God - (it's) overwhelming.

The angel must have been used to that sort of response because he said - "Fear not Mary, for God's favour is upon you. And He has chosen you to bear a son and you are to give Him the name Jesus. He will be the Son of God and He will rule on David's throne forever."

So many thoughts rushed through my mind in that very moment - how will *I* bear a child? Why have *I* been chosen? And is this for real - God is finally keeping the promise to David to put his descendant on the throne forever? I mean, our history was littered with 'David's sons' who ruled - some for better, some for worse - but we were still holding out for the BIG ONE - and he was to be *my son!*? This was all so much to process.

So I started with the most obvious - "How can this be, for I've never been with a man?"

The angel replied "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

Now that was amazing on its own, but then he kept going!

36 Even your relative Elizabeth is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. 37 For nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:35-37 NIV).

Those words hit me like a surge of adrenaline. Nothing is impossible with God. I knew that. Did I know that? Did I trust that? I thought about Rahab and Ruth and Sarah and Rebekah and ... Elizabeth...

"You're right" (I said). "Nothing is impossible with God. And I am His servant. May it be to me as you have said." And with that the angel left.

And that's when the rubber really hit the road. Did I believe it? Did I believe it enough to tell Joseph? Did I believe it enough to tell my father?! (*take a deep breath*)

"Be still and know that HE is God" - I reminded myself.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" - I reminded myself. These reminders carried me through some of the toughest of times.

Joseph was NOT pleased. He kept it together but he sent me away, saying he needed to figure out what to do next. I ran away in tears and did the only thing I could think to do - I went to talk to the only person I could think of who might maybe just be able to identify with my circumstances - my aunt

Elizabeth. She was miraculously pregnant. I was miraculously pregnant. Surely she would know what to do.

I had no idea at the time, but that was the LORD making my paths straight.

Elizabeth threw open the door and wrapped her arms around me and said ‘why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should visit me!?’ She said that her child jumped inside of her when she saw me, and moved by the Spirit, she knew that what I said was true. I WAS bearing the Son of God. And God would accomplish what He had promised.

That was all I needed to hear. Waves of faith washed over my anxieties and I knew that God would carry me through.

Not long after that, Joseph sent word to me that the LORD had appeared to HIM in a dream and he wanted me back. Faithful Joseph, always wanting to do the right thing. His faith strengthened my faith. And together we weathered the pregnancy and the scandalous rumours that spread through town.

And then, a few weeks before the due date, Joseph came to me and said ‘Mary, we need to go on a trip. Our Roman overlords have insisted that we be counted and so we need to go to Bethlehem.’

Are you kidding me? I thought. I didn’t feel like going from the hearth to the bed mat, let alone going from Nazareth to Bethlehem. But even so, I knew that we could count on God.

But then we got to Bethlehem and no one had room for us. Finally an innkeeper took us in – not to a room but into his house and manger – and it was there that Jesus was born. Jesus (*said with awe*) – the Son of David, the Son of God. Born to rule with justice now and forever more.

His birth was anything but private. Shepherds appeared, going on about angels, towns folk appeared – everyone wanted to see this baby in a manger.

But I just treasured these things in my heart and have often thought back to what all had happened.

Before the angel appeared, I thought I believed. But then I really HAD to believe. I had to take that step of faith and experience God’s faithfulness for myself.

My Son will do incredible things, but from the very first, I realized – Jesus changes everything. Before I *thought* that all things were possible with God, but now I know. With Jesus, nothing is impossible and I can trust Him to bring me through.

Joy to the world

Devotional message

Special music – Make Room by Casting Crowns - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYHpJnfy2IQ>

Silent night

Devotional

We've heard from a lot of people tonight – the innkeeper, the shepherd, the king, the mother.

I wonder if you can identify with any of them.

Maybe like the innkeeper, you're not sure what to make of this Jesus stuff, you're still trying to figure out where you are on your faith journey.

Maybe like the shepherd, you're feeling left out, a little lonely in a world of 'perfect people.'

Maybe you're like the king – totally absorbed in your own world, and reluctant to let anyone else, let alone any God, have any say in your life.

And maybe you're like Mary – trusting God through trying times.

Can you identify with any of them? Or maybe a bit of all of them?

Christmas Eve 2000 years ago they all encountered Jesus for the first time; this Christmas Eve, whether it's your first or your eighty first, you're meeting Jesus once again.

How will your respond?

Jesus really does change everything.
He brings blessing out of brokenness.
He brings rest for the weary.
He brings life out of death.
He brings peace when there is none.

He came, as a babe in a manger,
to die on a cross to forgive our sin and prove God's love for us.

How will you respond?

With gratitude and love? Resentment? Pride?

God came into the world to change things for the better; let Him do the same in your heart.

BENEDICTION

"The LORD bless you and keep you; for He is always with you.
May the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace." The LORD is with us (*Emmanuel*) – go in His peace.

Christmas Eve 2019

Welcome and intro

Call to worship – from Zechariah's song of praise in Luke 1

*Oh come all ye faithful
Joy has dawned*

Reading - Matthew 1:18-25/Advent candle

The first noel

Reading - The innkeeper

O little town of Bethlehem (4 vs)

Reading - The shepherd

Angels we have heard on high

Reading - The king

What child is this?

Reading - The mother

Joy to the world

Special music – Make room

Silent night

Benediction

Call to worship from Luke 1 (The Benedictus)

Reader - Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people.

All - He has sent us a mighty Savior from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised long ago.

Reader - He will save us from our enemies and from all who hate us.

All - He has been merciful to our father by remembering his covenant – the promise he made to our father Abraham.

Reader - We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live.

All - Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.