

Hi everyone! My name is JR. and I'm the teaching pastor here at Beavercreek Nazarene. I'm sure most of you are aware that we have 10 days left until Christmas, so that means today we're going to be talking about the Christmas story.

Given that Christmas is so close, I wanted to spend a few minutes with you this morning considering our various reactions to Christmas (or maybe better said, various ways we engage). I'm not talking about the so-called Holiday Wars - mainly because I'm going to assume that if you've set aside time to come here this morning, you acknowledge on some level that "Jesus is the reason for the season", to borrow a cliché.

No what I mean is that among we who are gathered here this morning are still a few different attitudes toward Christmas. [\[a map here - with each group progressively farther from God - will set up the other graphics nicely\]](#) For some of us, this is a deeply spiritual time of year. It's one where we have a strong sense of God's presence and we look forward each year to the powerful, special encounters we have at Christmas.

There's another segment of us that just doesn't get the spiritual stuff. We love Christmas - for all its stress and business, it's still a great chance to see family and celebrate the love we share. But we don't quite understand the Spiritual aspects. We come to church and all that, but we see those extra-spiritual people and we're just not quite like them.

Some others of us actively dread the Christmas season. It's painful for one reason or another - we're alone, or we've experienced a loss of some kind (death or divorce or something). Whatever the specific cause, we experience a sort of blockage between us and God during this time. We want to just put our heads down and get through the carols and decorations and endless parties. December 26 can't get here soon enough.

What all this means is that a few of us in here really connect with God at Christmas. We sense God's presence, we experience God's nearness.

But a lot of us don't. We feel separated from God to some degree. We experience a sort of gap between us and the "Godly People". Again - that doesn't mean we feel like rotten sinners or that our lives are horrible. We just don't feel as connected as other people we see around us in the Church. Christmas for us ends up being mostly about family and friends, rather than Jesus. We don't really resent those more spiritual people or anything, but it's hard not to feel like a second-class Christian when we're around them, or hear them talking about an encounter with God they've had or whatever.

The Good News for you today is that you're not a second-class Christian. The Christmas story is very good news for you because - as we heard earlier - when Jesus came into the world, he obliterated the difference between super-spiritual people and regular people. The very good news about the Christmas story is that Jesus has come into the world and *no one* is far from God anymore.

That might sound strange to you because you're in a church building on a Sunday morning. Unless you were dragged here (and I know a few of you were), you probably came in some sense to encounter God. In our world, that's how we think of Church - and of God. If you grew up in Church like I did, you were probably told not to run in the building because "it's God's house" (though no one could ever explain why God hated running so much).

And even now that I'm grown, that's how we all talk about - and more importantly - *think* about the Church building. This is where God is. If you want to connect with God, you come here. In this space, at this time. You get your fill of God, then go back out into the godless world as a light in the darkness.

But the surprising news about the Christmas story is that after Jesus comes into the world, God is no longer confined to a building where people have to come to him. Now God is out and about in the world, working where we least expect him and calling everyone to join in what he's doing to restore the world and heal our brokenness.

That means that God isn't here anymore. Or, better said, God's not *just* here. God is out there, out in our everyday world, out in the so-called spiritual darkness, shining brightly, calling everyone to him. And as long as we're looking in here, we're looking in the wrong place!

What's really good about this news is how it reframes who God is for all of us who've been in the Church or around the Church for a long time. God isn't up there on some sort of holy pedestal, approachable by only a chosen few ultra-spiritual persons. Rather, God is all around us, in the middle of our everyday lives. We don't have to approach God because in the Christmas story, God has approached *us*.

The Advent story we heard this morning of the Shepherds illustrates this beautifully. If you've been with us this month so far you know we've been in a season called Advent. Advent is a season we set aside to prepare ourselves to celebrate Christmas. We imagine what it would've been like to long for God to come into the world, to hope for and expect the miraculous rescue Jesus brings.

This year, we're exploring the traditional Nativity scene. Despite its familiar appearance, the Nativity is anything but ordinary. We have shepherds and magicians and a newly-married couple and one tiny baby on whom the whole course of the history of the universe turns.

Each week, we've looked at a different group featured here and asked what their road to Bethlehem looks like. We began with the magi, the consummate outsiders: pagan astrologers who found the good news about Jesus because they were seeking truth. Last week we looked at Herod, the king of Israel who's conspicuously absent from the story. He reminded us that in this manger we find the king over all kings, the one who truly defines our lives.

Today we meet the shepherds. If you have a bible with you, turn to Luke 2. If you grabbed one of our bibles on the way in, it's on page XXX. And if you don't own a bible, please keep that one, and consider it a gift from us. While you're turning there, let's talk about Shepherds:

Shepherds are such integral characters in the Nativity scene, we can't imagine the Christmas story without them. But if we traveled back to the first century, if we told an ancient person that the birth of the greatest king in human history was attended first by *shepherds*, they would laugh. Shepherds were a step above lepers and beggars in the class structure of the ancient world. They weren't quite the bottom of the bottom of the barrel, but they were close.

Try to imagine the President and First Lady having another child while in office, and then instead of inviting celebrities and diplomats to the baby shower, they invited part-time McDonalds and striking WalMart employees. We'd be impressed (or suspicious that it's a publicity stunt) because *that's just not how it's done*. Multiply that by about 100 and you have how absurd it would be to imagine shepherds at the birth of a king.

And to claim that Jesus is God, that the birth of *God* is attended by shepherds, is even more foolish. Especially in the ancient world. Because God lived only in the Temple, and only priests - those ultra-spiritual persons specially chosen by God and committed to very strict, holy lives - could enter the Temple. [bring a similar map up]

It's not unlike our attitude today: the Temple was God's house like we speak of the Church as God's house. For Israel, this was more literally true, though. In the middle of the Temple was a place called the Holy of Holies (which was a Hebrew way of saying 'the holiest place', just like 'king of kings' means 'the greatest king'). And a physical embodiment of God lived in the Holiest Place. [on the map] The Jewish people called this the "shekinah glory" of God and it was a sort of painfully bright light - the descriptions of it are understandably vague. But the point is that the shekinah glory was God's physical presence. People could actually point to where God lived, and it was only in the Holiest Place. In the middle of the Temple.

So the closer you were to the Holiest place, the closer you were to God. [illustrate this on the map?] Shepherds weren't allowed in the Holiest place. They weren't even allowed in the Holy place, the Temple proper. They were relegated to the outer courts. They spent their whole lives technically a part of Israel, but excluded.

Have you ever been that person? Someone at the bottom of the totem pole? Maybe you're ostracized by your family - technically part of the family gatherings but left out. Or maybe it's at work. Maybe it's here in the Church, as we've already considered.

If you can relate, then you're beginning to get a sense of who the shepherds were. They're a lot like us: some good, some not so good. They don't have bad lives. They raise families, work hard. But they're never close to God. They've heard all the stories. They sing the songs and pray. But they're... distant. Outside. Excluded.

Until one night, a night that seemed like every other night. They were out in the fields, taking turns keeping watch, wary for thieves, wolves or bears.

Let's look at how the angel that shows up is described: **Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified.** -- Luke 2:9

This is the language used throughout the Old Testament to describe God's shekinah glory, God's physical presence on the earth. That makes this moment particularly provocative because - as far as these shepherds knew - God's physical presence hasn't left the Holiest Place in the Temple in hundreds of years.

And now, of all places in the world, of all the people God could come to, God doesn't appear in Rome to Caesar or in Jerusalem to Herod or even to the priests in the Temple.

God comes to them. The shekinah glory of God surrounds them and suddenly their ordinary, everyday night is engulfed in the holy fire of God's physical presence.

No wonder they were terrified.

And then the angel - the messenger of God, the one who bears God's divine presence - speaks to them:

Don't be afraid! I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger. -- Luke 2:10-12

The angel's language is provocative. He declares that this child who is even now swaddled and lying in a manger is the Savior, the Messiah and the Lord. These are three titles regularly used in the Old Testament. God is "Lord" of course. And there were a number of people who received the titles "Savior" and "Messiah" - they mean "rescuer" and "chosen one".

It's important to note that these Shepherds are Jewish, which means they know all these Scriptures, all these stories. They recognize these titles - Savior, Messiah, Lord. We'd call that "church language" today. And the Shepherds are pretty much "church people". Born and raised in religion, but always feeling like the outer-most insiders.

Until tonight, when God leaves the Temple to appear to them and tell them the good news: the rescuer, the chosen one they've all been waiting for is here, and it's *God*. It's the Lord. The Lord *is* the Savior and Messiah!

This is the first time in the whole history of humankind that a single human being has been Savior, Messiah and Lord. Because this baby is God become human. The infinite made finite.

And these Shepherds are the first to know (apart from mom and dad, of course). In this moment, one of those Persian magicians is noticing a new star in the sky for the first time. And a few miles away, Herod sleeps in ignorantly in his palace.

And these outside insiders, these shepherds at the bottom of the social ladder, these men who've always been separated from God by closed doors and veils and prejudice, they are surrounded and caught up in the very shekinah glory of God and given the secret of the universe.

The Savior, the Messiah and the Lord has been born. Go find him!

And just in case God's presence, the good-news announcement wasn't enough, to remove the last bit of trepidation, God gives them a sign, proof that God has come not just for the elite, not just for the insiders, the priests and kings and religious people, but for shepherds too:

God is lying in a manger.

When was the last time old King Herod even *saw* a manger? When was the last time a priest had to clean old, molding straw out of a manger so the animals could eat new, fresh straw?

Mangers aren't tools of the rich and powerful. And yet God has made a manger his bed.

Clearly this Savior, Messiah and Lord is a different sort of king than the shepherds are used to hearing about. No wonder the Scriptures call him the "king of kings" and "lord of lords".

No wonder these shepherds, upon hearing the angels' announcement, set off to Bethlehem. The good news is that God has come for *them*. Not just for the religious, the spiritual, the wealthy, the insiders. God has come for *everyone*.

That's good news for us here today, too. [bring back the map from the beginning] No matter where you consider yourself in relation to God, the good news is that you don't have to come to God. You don't have to try to make yourself better or more spiritual or all those other mind games we play with ourselves.

The good news is that God has come to you. The child lies not in a church building, but in a cubicle. In a toolbox. In an open briefcase. In your craft room. Your man cave. At the restaurant. At the bar.

God has left the Temple and lives among us. Everywhere. God is not here in the Church (or: more accurately, God is not *just* here in the church.) God is out there. Everywhere.

That's good news because you can find God where you are. There's no such thing as an outsider. No such thing as someone who's not good enough for God.

Advent is the time we recognize that God is coming to us. That those days of longing and feeling inadequate are gone. Because the king of kings has come to rule, and his throne is a manger, not a golden chair.

So today: where do you see yourself in relation to God? Are you the insider, the person who knows God's love well and lives in it? If so, thank God for you. Because you know already that your job is to be a picture of God to those who don't understand how much God loves them, how close they actually are already to God.

For the rest of us, we who feel some distance, who look up at the super-spiritual with envy and a little shame: The good news is that we're *wrong*. God is *not* far from us. In fact God has left his house to come to where we are, to live with us, to show us the way to life.

If we're looking for God in church, we may just be looking in the wrong place. Because God is out there, working to draw everyone into a relationship with him. So my challenge to you today is to look for God not here, but in your ordinary, everyday life.

The angel didn't send the shepherds to the Temple, but to their town, to find God lying in a manger.

So too: look for God not here, but in your home. Among your friends and family. At work. Jesus promised that all who seek him will find him. So this week, leave your field and search for the God who is at work where you are.

Communion SetUp

We celebrate communion today as the announcement of the Good News that God has come among us.