Preaching Series: The Wonder of Christmas
Sermon Title: Angels We Have Heard on High

Text: Luke 2:8-20 -- And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" 15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Introduction: While Pastor Brian is preaching at River Ridge Spring Grove this morning, I want to bring to you the third message in the series that we are sharing called the Hymns of Christmas. Signs are meant to draw your attention. Good ones are especially effective in doing just that. Here are a few that compelled people to notice them: (1) **A Sign for a Plumber**: We repair what your husband fixed; (2) **How about this one on the door of a plastic surgeon's office**? "Hello, can we help you pick your nose?"; (3) **On a fence surrounding a home**: "Salesmen always welcome; dog food is quite expensive."; (4) **At a car dealership**: "The best way to get back on your feet - miss a car payment."; (5) **Outside a muffler shop**: "No appointment necessary, we can hear you coming."; (6) **On a desk in a reception room**: "We shoot every 3rd salesman, and the 2nd one just left."; (7) **In a counselor's office**: "Growing old is mandatory, growing wise is optional; (8) **On the wall of a Baltimore estate**: "Trespassers will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law -- Sisters of Mercy"; (9) **In a Florida maternity ward**: "No children allowed."; (10) **In a funeral parlor**: "Ask about our layaway plan."

The power of a good sign is that it can make you stop what you're doing and take notice. In the passage we're looking at this morning, the angel of the Lord appears to shepherds in the hills of Judea just outside of Bethlehem and announces the birth of Christ. Then he says, "***This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger***." Just like the pull of hundreds of witty billboards and advertisements meant to draw you in so that you'll take a closer look, the sign that the shepherds were given was for the same purpose and, might I add, with a life-transforming effect. In the next half hour or so I would like to share **three observations about the good news announced to the shepherds** by the angel of the Lord and their faithful response to it.

The shepherds RECEIVED the good news **(Luke 2:8-14 -- And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased").** Some of you may be thinking to yourselves, **"Why make a big deal about the shepherds receiving the good news**?" After all, wouldn't anyone who had an angel appear to make such an

important announcement be receptive to it? Not always. We know that Zechariah the priest who was the father of John the Baptist wasn't (**Luke 1:13-20 -- Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time**). No, the fact that the shepherds received the good news stands out for at least three reasons:

- ***The CONTEXT of the announcement***. Israel had not heard from the Lord in hundreds of years. **The last time anyone had beheld His glory** (*this was the phrase used by Luke to describe the visible sign of His presence* -- **the glory of the Lord shone around them***)* **was when Ezekiel watched as it departed from Israel**. *In his vision, he saw the movement of the glory of God from His throne above the ark of the covenant to the threshold of the temple marking the suspension of His rule over Israel and His departure*. So when the glory of the Lord lit up the skies around the shepherds and an angel suddenly appeared to them, this kind of thing was so unusual that they were "***filled with fear*** (*sheer terror at the sight*)." "***What is going on here?***" they must have wondered. **It had been such a long time since God had addressed His people that some probably wondered if He ever would again**. And yet, if there was a moment in time when Israel was ripe for good news it was then. Living under the oppression of the Romans, still waiting for their Messiah to deliver them from bondage, God's people had reached a low point, a fact not lost on the shepherds as they watched their flocks by night.
- **The CONTENT of the announcement.** This was no typical birth announcement! The angel called it "***good news of great joy that will be for all the people***." This is a pretty accurate summary of the true meaning of Christmas! Note that Luke called special attention to the timing of it as well … ***Today***! **The word is used several times in his gospel to announce the salvation of God** (**See Luke 4:16-21; 5:20-26; 119:5-9; 23:43**). The One who was born was identified by three terms all of which are related to His saving work: (**1**) ***Savior*** –The Greeks and Romans applied the word to their gods or to great military and political figures. It is now applied to Jesus by the angel. It refers to His role as Deliverer, not from Roman rule, but from that which prevents us from attaining eternal life – sin that leads to death. (**2**) ***Christ*** -- It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Messiah." Both words mean to be anointed. The One born in the manger was anointed of God for a special purpose—to give His life as a ransom for many (**Matthew 20:28**). (**3**) ***Lord*** – This child was invested with power and authority. He forgave sin (**See Matthew 9:6**), cast out demons (**See Mark 1:27**), and cleansed the temple (**See Mark 11:15-16, 27-28**). The earliest Christian confessions recognized Christ's authority in no uncertain terms (**Romans 10:9 -- If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved; 1 Corinthians 12:3 -- No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit**).
- **The CONFERRING of the announcement.** The angel appeared to shepherds, not kings or the spiritual elite, to announce the birth of Christ. In first-century Palestine, those who tended sheep and goats did not have a good reputation. They were considered nothing more than roving vagabonds who did not respect the property of others. They were so lowly regarded that shepherds were not allowed to testify in the law courts (Talmud, Sanhedrin 25b).

  This seems to be the way God does things. He routinely uses the foolish, weak, and lowly to accomplish His purposes so that no man may glory in God's work (**1 Corinthians 1:26-29 -- For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not**

many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God). **Not long ago, I read about a shoemaker who wanted to do something great for God**. Some people thought he was a nut. After all, he was just a shoemaker and an average one at that. But in the evenings, he studied Greek and Hebrew. He devoured books to expand his horizons, which, because of his poverty, kept him bound to a small, forgotten English Village. Many thought his time would have been better spent getting a second job to support his growing family. The young man's passion, however, wasn't a curious, self-satisfying hobby. Early in life, he had become concerned about the millions of unbelievers outside of Europe, and so spent great effort trying to figure out what could be done to bring them the gospel. With God's help, he slowly devised a plan. He ended up going to India to serve as the **first Protestant missionary in the modern era**. His zeal inspired a generation of men and women like Adoniram Judson, Hudson Taylor and David Livingstone to take up the cause of missions as well. **William Cary**, the impoverished shoemaker, followed his God-given passion and as a result, large parts of the world with little or no access to the gospel have countless numbers who now confess Christ as Lord. And to think, he was just a shoemaker. "***Not many wise, not many powerful, not many noble…***" Who could understand this better than the shepherds? Everything about the announcement of Christ's birth was extraordinary, from the historical context to the message itself, and finally, to the ones to whom it was given!

The shepherds BELIEVED the good news (Luke 2:15-16 -- When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger). We know this to be true because they went looking for the sign! Had they doubted the experience, they would never have left their sheep (*most likely to the care of others*). The shepherds were probably raising them to be sacrificed in the temple in Jerusalem. Some scholars believe that they were only hired hands, employed by the religious hierarchy who stood to make a good profit in just a few short months during Passover. ***Their willingness to abandon their duties and look for the sign of a baby lying in a manger may well have led to their own unemployment***. The only reasonable explanation for their behavior was that they believed that Jesus was the Savior, Christ the Lord. The sign simply confirmed what the already knew to be true having heard the good news from the angel. The whole point of signs during the ministry of Christ was to strengthen one's faith in Him (**See John 2:11; 4:46-54; 6:5-14**).

There are two words that provide us with some insight into the faith of the shepherds in **verse 16**. The first is "***hurried***." There was no delay in their response to the message of the angel. Knowing his words to be true, they quickly left in search of the baby. Had doubt ruled the day, they would never have made such haste in seeking Him out. The second is "***found***." This implies that it took some effort to locate the baby. He was, after all, not in some posh inn, but lying in a manger in a cave somewhere in Bethlehem. Both words are valuable in helping us to understand the nature of faith. ***When it comes to believing in Jesus there must be no delay and anyone wishing to find Him must put forth all the effort necessary to do so*** (**Jeremiah 29:13 -- You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart**).

The shepherds PROCLAIMED the good news **(Luke 2:17-20 -- And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them).** Once they located the child and his parents, the shepherds began to spread the word concerning what had been told them about the baby. **Other than Mary and Joseph, we don't know who they shared it with. We know, however, that they must have been pretty convincing so that, in spite of the reputation of most shepherds, the people were struck with amazement**. This is the expected response to any display of the supernatural in

the Gospel of Luke (**See Luke 1:21, 63-66; 4:33-36; 5:26; 9:37-43; 11:14, etc**). How much more so to the announcement of an angel that **real peace** is available to all who are the recipients of God's goodwill toward man?

It's been my experience that people today, as much as any other time in the last fifty years, are waiting for some good news that hasn't been preceded by bad news. You know what I mean, don't you? ***House sales are down because of higher interest rates, but interest rates are your checking account are up so you're making more money***; ***inflation has risen sharply which has caused profits to increase making your 401k worth more***; ***the cruel Asad regime is out in Syria, but it may be worse for Americans***. Perhaps this is why good news/bad news jokes are so popular. They reflect real life more than we would care to admit. Here's one you might enjoy: A criminal lawyer says to his client, "***I have some good news and some bad news***. ***Which do you want first***?" "***Well***," says the accused man, "***give me the bad news first***." The lawyer responds, "***I'm sorry to say that DNA tests confirm it was your blood that was all over the crime scene***." "***Oh, that's really bad***," says the man. "***What's the good news***?" "***The same test revealed that your cholesterol is down to 130***." I'm happy to inform you that when it comes to the good news of the Gospel, there is no downside for those who put their trust in Christ. It is all good! The Messiah born in Bethlehem has come to bring peace between us God by offering himself in payment for our sins. So the question I have for you as we close this morning is this: **Have you come to the place where you, too, have received and believed the Good News**? If God is speaking to your heart today, just tell Him that you believe that Jesus is the Messiah who has come to deliver you from sin and death through His sacrifice on the cross. And guess what … if you really believe it … it won't be too long before you're proclaiming the good news to everyone else.

Conclusion: Now, for our Christmas hymn – **Angels We Have Heard on High**. Most historians believe that the words to this well-known carol were written by a monk or priest because of the use of Latin in the chorus of the song. Though it first appeared in a French songbook in 1855, the words were probably penned as much as 1,500 years before and sung as part of the celebration of the birth of our Savior. The song's four verses embrace the angels' visit to the lowly shepherds and the shepherd's response. As I mentioned earlier, for many students of the Bible, the angels coming to men who worked menial jobs in the field and informing them of the birth of the Son of God symbolizes that Christ came for all people, rich or poor, humble or powerful. **If you're wondering, the phrase – Gloria in excelsis Deo – means Glory to God in the highest**. Some believe the chorus was written within a hundred years of Christ's birth. If that's the case, the roots of **Angels We Have He Heard on High** might go back to someone who actually knew Jesus when He walked the earth. In any case, few Christmas songs so fully describe the joy that Christians have felt for generations knowing that our Savior was born in Bethlehem. We're going to sing it in a moment, but before we do, listen to the words:

Angels we have heard on high
Sweetly singing o'er the plains
And the mountains in reply
Echoing their joyous strains:

Gloria in excelsis Deo (repeat)
Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous stains prolong?
Say what may the tidings be,
Which inspire your heavenly song

Gloria in excelsis Deo (repeat)

Come to Bethlehem and see

Him whose birth the angels sing;
Come, adore on bended knee
Christ the Lord, the newborn King

Gloria in excelsis Deo (repeat)

See within a manger laid,
Jesus, Lord of heaven and earth;
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid,
With us sing our Savior's birth.

Gloria in excelsis Deo (repeat)