



'History of the Christmas Hymns!'

Sermon #1: 'While Shepherds Watched their Flocks!'

Luke 2:8-10

Wednesday, December 4th, 2024 at 7 PM

New Series Overview:

- Tonight, we begin a 3-part sermon series on the History of the Christmas Hymns.
 - ***This series is going to be different from the regular or traditional way of having a Christmas Sermon Series.***
 - While this series will still focus on the scriptures that tell us the Christmas story, we will also dive into the lyrics of the Christmas hymns we've been singing all our lives.
 - ***In all 3 of the hymns we will look at, we find great theology, and based on the lyrics, we know what verse of scripture the hymn writer***

was inspired by as he wrote that particular hymn.

- While this will be a different way of looking at the Christmas story, I believe it will be interesting and exciting, as we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Sermon #1: 'While Shepherds Watched their Flocks!'

Luke 2:8-10

Sermon in a Sentence:

While the Shepherds watched their flocks that dark night they experienced great resistance, the glory revealed, and genuine relief.

Intro:

- In the ancient world (and even today), Shepherds sit at the bottom of the social ladder.
 - ***They have a difficult job. They constantly smell bad, don't get paid much of anything, and are usually cast out of society.***
- Tonight, we just sang the hymn that was written by ***Nahum Tate*** entitled 'While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks!'.
 - I know we just sang it, but let me read the lyrics of the hymn.
 - ***Verse 1:*** While shepherds watched
Their flocks by night
All seated on the ground
The angel of the Lord came down

And glory shone around
And glory shone around

- **Verse 2:** “Fear not,” he said,
For mighty dread
Had seized their troubled minds
“Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind,
To you and all mankind.”
- **Verse 3:** “To you in David’s
Town this day
Is born of David’s line
The Savior who is Christ the Lord
And this shall be the sign
And this shall be the sign.”
- **Verse 4:** “The heavenly Babe
You there shall find
To human view displayed
And meanly wrapped
In swathing bands
And in a manger laid
And in a manger laid.”
- **Verse 5:** “All glory be to
God on high
And to the earth be peace;
Goodwill henceforth
From heaven to men
Begin and never cease
Begin and never cease!”

- **When reading the lyrics of this hymn, there’s not doubt in my mind that Nahum Tate was inspired to write these words from the scripture of Luke 2:8-14.**

- As we will see on Sunday, Nahum is not the only hymn writer who would use Luke 2. But for tonight we are going to focus on verses 8-10 of Luke’s Gospel.

- **Who was Nahum Tate?**

- Nahum was born in Dublin Ireland in 1652.
- He was the son of an Irish Clergyman.
- **He received his education at Trinity College and in 1690 was elevated to become the Poet for the royal court of William and Mary during their reign from 1689-1702.**

- Sadly, he struggled with live’s sins as many of us do, and he particularly struggled with alcohol abuse and spending money he didn’t even have.

- **Nahum Tate died in 1715 at a Debtor’s Prison in Southwark, London.**

- A **Debtor’s prison** was a place where someone had to go if they could not pay their debts.

- While his life ended in sad circumstances due to poor life choices, in 1700 he and Nicholas Brady published

the first of what we know as today as ‘hymnals’ which included 16 hymns.

- *One of which, is ‘While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks!’ and was written by Nahum Tate.*
- Lets go ahead and dive into the scriptures of the passage that inspired Nahum Tate to write this particular hymn.

Read Luke 2:8-10

Question to Ask:

What does this hymn inspired from Luke 2:8-10, show us about the Shepherds and what occurred that night?

Truth #1: Great Resistance. (v. 8)

- ‘And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.’
 - The first announcement of the Messiah’s birth was given by an Angel to the group in society that were resisted by folks arguably, more than any other group.
 - *Sometimes when God moves and choose to do things we don’t understand, we often resist this.*
 - I love what W.W. had to say regarding the significance of the angel coming to an anonymous group of shepherds who were working the night shift...

- *‘By visiting the shepherds, the angel revealed the grace of God toward mankind.’- Warren Wiersbe*

- God’s Grace to mankind was going to be met with great resistance to the Jewish people. Even to this day, non-Messianic Jews still believe and trust in the Law, and not the Grace of God.

- *I believe there are 2 things to point out about the Great Resistance. One from the time of Nahum Tate, and the other with the resistance the Shepherds received from society.*

- **Resistance to the Hymns in England.**

- Contrary to popular belief, hymns have not always been around in Christian Church culture.

- ***The singing of hymns as you and I know it today was non-existent in England and in the United States up until the beginning of the 18th century (1700s).***

- That is what makes this hymn, written by Tate in 1700, that more remarkable.

- Prior to the beginning of the 1700s, most all congregational singing in England consisted of different settings of the Psalms.

- *Their songbook was called ‘The Psalter’.*

- The most used or ‘famous’ Psalter was published in 1562

and was called the Sternhold-Hopkins Psalter.

- *With permission from King William in 1696, Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady were given the chance to write a new songbook of the Psalms with different metrical variations that would have kept up with the literary tastes of that day.*
 - This new Psalter was called the ‘New Version’ and was met with much widespread resistance.
- *One Church attender said this about Tate and Brady’s new work ‘They have taken the Lord away.’*
 - What made this new Psalter so controversial, is while they had many of the songs of the Psalms still in the book, they added 16 what you and I would call hymns. One of them, was this one.
 - *The reason that the hymns were so controversial was that writers were writing these hymns inspired and based on the scriptures, but not necessarily the verbatim words of the Psalms.*
- Something that the Lord has used for many years to bring Glory and Praise to Himself, was met with great resistance by those in England.

- *But despite the resistance, in 1700 King William III endorsed the New Version song book and required it to be used by the Church of England.*

- From this, it came to America and Hymns became the new thing, which is why we now have so many.

- *Lesson for us to learn here: Just because something may not be your ‘favorite’ doesn’t mean that God cannot use it as a tool to bring others to Himself while simultaneously bringing praise, honor, and Glory to His name.*

- The Jews would end up rejecting Jesus. They thought they were getting a military leader and government reformer, instead they got a baby who would die on the Cross. They resisted.

- In addition to great resistance, we see the social rejection that the Shepherds faced...

- *Rejection towards the Shepherds.*

- As I briefly mentioned a few moments ago, Shepherds did not have a great life. They were shunned by society and often rejected.

- *They were usually the rough bunch crew of society.*

- They were known as the social outcasts of Israel.

- *The work that shepherds did made them ceremonially unclean and it would keep them away from the temple for weeks at a time, so that they could not be made clean.*
 - Because of their work they could not observe the ceremonially laws of the Torah.
 - Shepherds were also so lowly thought of, that they could not give testimony in a court of law. They were thought of as ‘unreliable’.
- *It’s interesting to consider the thought that these Shepherds were caring for the sheep that would be used in temple sacrifices, yet they themselves were not allowed in regular Jewish Temple activity because they were said to be unclean.*
 - How fitting and significant is it, that though they were resisted and rejected by society that God saw fit that the good news about Jesus and the future ultimate sacrificial lamb be given to human shepherds.
- *The other thing to consider about these shepherds, is that Shepherds were practical men. What some would call ‘A man’s man’.*
 - Because of this they would have little to do with fantasy and false things. I find it

fascinating that God selected hard working men, who society could care less about, to be the first ones to hear that the Messiah had come to the world.

- We see the Great Resistance by mankind through the years, now lets look at the Glory Revealed.

Truth #2: *Glory Revealed. (v. 9)*

- ‘And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.’
 - The darkness that night would have had no choice but to run away from God’s Glory that was shown to these shepherds.
 - The Glory of the Lord, as is the phrase that is used here, is far greater than you and I could possibly imagine.
 - *In the Old Testament, sometimes the Glory of the Lord appeared in the presence of God Himself, sometimes as a cloud, and sometimes as a bright light or burning fire.*
- *To the shepherds that night, the Glory of the Lord appeared to them.*
 - We can’t say exactly HOW this happened, because the text does not tell us that.

- ***But, we do know that this was the first time in many centuries that the Glory of the Lord had returned to earth.***
 - After over 400 years of silence, the Lord had spoken yet again.
- There are **3** important things to look at concerning the Glory that was revealed that night.
- ***A Messenger. (v. 9a)***
 - ‘And an angel of the Lord appeared to them,’
 - The Lord used an Angel to appear to the Shepherds.
 - ***Some scholars try to say that it was Gabriel, but we don’t know that for sure.***
 - ***What we do know is that at first the text tells us ‘an angel appeared’ singular.***
 - And then in Luke 2:13, we are told that a ‘multitude’ of angels appeared and began singing praises to the Lord. Meaning that literally thousands of Angels began to praise the Lord.
 - We know that the Lord used an Angel, so let me ***clarify*** what Angels are Biblically and what we as a culture, have sadly morphed them into in our minds. (We’ve gotten away from the Biblical definition of Angels).
 - ***#1: Christ is above Angels.***

- ‘having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.’ Hebrews 1:4
- ***God created angels, and as we see them appear in scripture, He is in charge of them and they report to Him.***

■ ***#2: Angels Worship and Serve Almighty God.***

- “Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” Revelation 5:11-12

■ ***#3: Angels can appear in different forms.***

- “His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.” Matthew 28:3-4

- This angel must have been noticeable and even dazzling.

■ ***#4: Angels are intelligent but also have emotions.***

- “Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Luke 15:10

■ ***#5: Angels can speak to human beings.***

- “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” Galatians 1:8

■ ***#6: Angels do not marry and do not procreate.***

- “In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.” But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” Matthew 22:28-30
 - Jesus was telling the Pharisees that the idea of

marriage as it currently is, will not continue in heaven. The angels don’t procreate in Heaven and neither will we in Heaven is the idea that I believe is conveyed here.

■ ***#7: All of Angels may have been created at the same time.***

- Colossians 1:16-17 seems to give us the idea that all the angles were created at the same time and the Bible doesn’t ever say that any were added to those that were originally created.
 - “For by^[a] him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Colossians 1:16-17

- ***You and I must understand that when your beloved loved one dies, they do not gain their angel wings. That is not Biblical.***
 - When your loved one goes to Heaven if they had a personal relationship with Jesus, they are not worshipped by Angels. They will worship Christ.
- ***It's important that we do not elevate human beings at the same level as angels.***
 - When we do that, we are showing we have an improper view of the Biblical definition of Angels.
- ***The Magnitude. (v. 9b)***
 - ‘and the glory of the Lord shone around them,’
 - Briefly a moment ago I shared the Glory of the Lord and the different forms that could have involved.
 - ***I must ask you, are you ready to see the Glory of the Lord one day?***
 - ***There is coming a day where you will receive a new body, and you will stand in front of Jesus Christ in all His Glory.***
 - That is going to be quite the sight to behold. But, I must ask you, have you made things right between you and God so that you will be able to His Glory and Worship Him In all His Glory for all of eternity?
- Revelation 21:4 is the Glimpse of the Glory of the Lord that we will get to see and experience:
 - ‘He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’ Revelation 21:4
- ***While I would've loved to have witnessed the magnitude of the Lord's Glory in the sky that night as His Glory was shown to the Shepherds, I will one day see and experience His Glory for ALL eternity.***
 - The messenger (an angel) appeared, the magnitude of this moment was exposed, and now the Shepherds misunderstand and react in fear...
- ***The Misunderstanding. (v. 9c)***
 - ‘and they were filled with great fear.’
 - I really and truly can't blame the reaction of the Shepherds here. I too, feel that I would've reacted in fear.
 - ***Based on the verbal affirmation of the Angel, I believe the Shepherd's misunderstood because of how the Angel seeks to comfort them.***
 - ****Word Study****
 - The english word for fear here is translated from the Greek term '***Phobeo***'

which occurs 95 times in the NT and can also mean reverence and respect.

- ***Either way, they reacted in such a way where most individuals where God's Glory or an Angel appear.***

- 'And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.'
 - And as is the same in other texts like Luke 1:13, Mark 6:50 and Revelation 1:17, they are told to not be afraid.

- So far tonight we've seen the great resistance, the glory revealed, and lastly and finally, we see Genuine Relief.

Truth #3: *Genuine Relief. (v. 10)*

- 'And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.'
 - The Angel begins to speak and seek to bring relief to these shepherds who without a doubt had probably never seen anything like this in their lives.
 - ***To these lowly men, the angel gives the highest theology to them in verses 10-12.***
 - While we will wait until Sunday to unpack verse 11 and beyond, just in verse 10 we find **3** huge theological truths that the angel revealed to the shepherds that we can also rely on today when it comes to the Lord.

- ***Fear Not. (v. 10a)***

- 'And the angel said to them, "Fear not,'
- As hard of a theological concept as this is for folks, we need to be reminded by God in His Word that we should not fear if we know Him and have a relationship with Him.
 - ***The Angel very clearly and plainly tells the Shepherds not to fear but instead, they are to do the opposite and have joy! Why? Because God is in the process of fulfilling His Eschatological promises to them.***
- They did not quite understand it yet, and oftentimes, you and I don't understand that God may be doing something in our lives as a part of fulfilling His plan for us and beyond.
 - ***The reasons you and I don't have to fear is of course because God is in control, but also because of the announcement and very existence of the Gospel.***
- ***The Gospel really and truly does Change everything!***
 - So, no matter what you're going through tonight, just as the Angel told the Shepherds not to fear because of the GOSPEL, you and I must not fear. Also, because of the GOSPEL!

- ***Foundational Truth. (v. 10b)***

- ‘for behold, I bring you good news of great joy’
- The word ‘good news’ here in the Greek text brings us an astounding theological truth.

- ****Word Study****

- The phrase ‘good news’ in the Greek comes from the word **‘Euangelizo’** which is the verbal form of the greek word ‘Euongellion’ which is translated as Gospel, and good news.

- ***The good news that the Angel was proclaiming that night is the foundational truth of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ!***

- The good news is what we will focus on Sunday morning, the but the fact that God had come to earth in the form of His Son, Jesus Christ.

- ***The foundation of what we believe is not programs, good ideas, morals, rules and regulations, or the law. The foundational truth of what we as Christians believe is found in what the Angel said to the shepherds that night.***

- ‘Good news’, the Gospel is truly good.

- ***Feel Secure. (v. 10c)***

- ‘that will be for all the people.’

- ***The angel also adds another truth that often gets overlooked, but it should make us feel secure.***

- It’s the fact that the Gospel, by God’s sovereign and ultimate design, has always been meant for all people.

- ***Yet again, this is significant because the angel appeared and gave the announcement of the Gospel to society's lowest class of people.***

- I believe this was done on purpose to show that the Gospel was meant for all people. Not just the wealthy, or the scribes and pharisees but all.

- ***This is a reminder for us that we can be secure in that God has made the Gospel available to all people, but also in the fact that there’s nothing we can do to earn it, we just accept it based on the fact that God chose to make it available to all people.***

- This should also ignite our hearts to take the Gospel to all places and to all people. Every tribe, nation, and tongue.

- Because the Gospel is for all people, as the angel said that night, we should not feel that someone is too ‘low’ or too far away, from receiving this truly great news.

Conclusion:

- I know tonight we took a different route and or approach at a story we all know well.
 - *Maybe you weren't as familiar with the hymn, but it's my prayer tonight that in that hymn, you see the narrative that is written so clearly and vividly by Nahum Tate that even a child could visualize the events that unfolded that night.*
- *As we looked at those lyrics tonight, it caused us to do a deep dive in the scripture verses that inspired Nahum Tate to write that hymn...*
 - As we think about the History of this Hymn, may we not forget the truths that are revealed in this text, the night the Angels came and told the Shepherds of the 'good news'.
 - **Truth #1: *Great Resistance. (v. 8)***
 - **Truth #2: *Glory Revealed. (v. 9)***
 - **Truth #3: *Genuine Relief. (v. 10)***