

Have you ever been invited to participate in something out of the ordinary? Have you ever been asked or invited to be a part of something unusual? Around Christmas time maybe this includes going to see a crazy light display, or attending an ugly Christmas sweater party. If you think about it long enough, I'm guessing you'll recall a time when you were invited to something out of the ordinary.

I was once invited to a white elephant gift exchange- you know, where the gifts are intentionally odd- and the people at this party went a little cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs with that deal. They took that stuff seriously. At the end, after all the gifts had been opened they set a timer and you had one minute to tag the person with the gift you wanted, and if you did, they had to exchange their gift with you. Then they said 'go' and people went flying over chairs and sofas to tag each other. It was madness! One guy had received his gift and it was a \$20 bill along with a note that said "You're the rabbit!" They chased him outside and down the street!

We get invited to unusual things sometimes, and when we do it's exciting. But no invitation we've received, no matter how unusual or extraordinary could ever come close to the one that was extended on the very first Christmas night.

You're familiar with the story, I'm sure (if you've seen *A Charlie Brown Christmas* as many times as I have then you can probably recite it by heart right along with Linus), but let's read it again together. Let's listen to the story again with fresh ears. Place yourself in the shoes of these shepherds as they experience this incredible invitation.

Luke 2:8-20

**8** *That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. 9 Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, 10 but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. 11 The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! 12 And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,*  
**14**  
*"Glory to God in highest heaven,  
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."*  
**15** *When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." 16 They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. 17 After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. 18 All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, 19 but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. 20 The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.*

Think about the faces of these poor shepherds. Have you ever seen the face of someone who's been really frightened? (White as a sheet; shaking, sweating, awestruck.) Keep in mind that, according to what we know about shepherds in that day, we're talking about a bunch of teenage boys. Even today, in Palestine, shepherds are in their teens or preteens on average. Our nativity scenes depict the shepherds as these bearded middle-aged men, so we view them as rugged outdoorsmen, and it's funny to imagine them scared to death. But these were just young men.

These boys experienced something incredible that night. An announcement of the highest order- "Good news that will bring great joy to everyone"- a Savior has been born.

This is probably the most famous text about the birth of Jesus. You've probably heard someone teach on it at some point in your life- and there's a lot to learn here. But today I want us to ask the text a simple question, 'how should we respond to Jesus birth?' How should we respond to news like this?

I think we'll find a clear answer to that question when we look closer, and that's what I'd like to share with you today. And it's almost too simplistic- it's not going to blow your doors off- but I think it's exactly what we should do with news like this. Are you ready? How should we respond to the birth of Jesus?

I think we need to respond the way the shepherds did. We respond today the same way the shepherds did on that glorious night. It's that simple.

Now some of you might protest: "It's impossible to respond the way the shepherds did! We weren't there and no matter how hard we look we're not going to find a baby in a manger." (At least one not made of fiberglass.) And you're right- if you're thinking that today- of course you are. But let's forget, for a moment, that the angelic invitation wasn't ours to hear, and let's simply examine what these young men did in response. As we do, I think it will become clearer to us why we should do what they did.

So what did the shepherds do? The shepherds respond to this news in distinct ways. First they listen, then they investigate, then they share.

Let's start with listening. We're told in verse 20 that the shepherds return "*glorifying and praising God for all they had heard...*" The angels told them something, and they listened. In verse 15, "*the shepherds said to each other, 'Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'*"

But the shepherds weren't the only ones who listen in the text. When the shepherds begin spreading the news of what has happened it says in verse 18, "*All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished.*" That word, "story" is the Greek word *rhema*, which means "message." So the angels shared their *rhema* (message) with the shepherds, then the shepherds share that message with everyone else and they're amazed at what they hear. And then there's one final person involved. Luke tells us in verse 19 about Mary's response. She's heard a "message" too, not only from the shepherds, but she's heard from an angel as well, and in verse 19 it says that "*Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often.*"

What's my point? Luke, the writer of this Gospel, is telling us the importance of listening well. How we *hear* the message.

One of the ongoing issues in my own marriage is how well I really listen. Anyone else out there can relate with that? Many times, something will happen to me that catches me off guard and my wife, Jennifer, will say, "Why is that surprising to you? I've been telling you about this. I talked with you about it multiple times. Didn't you listen?" And the answer is usually yes & no. Yes, I heard you say it. Yes, I remember acknowledging it. But did I really pay attention- did I really listen? No.

What Luke is actually telling us about is how easy it is to hear and not hear. How do we hear the message of God- His word- and how should we respond?

First, don't miss the ordinary way in which God's word comes to most people. The word of God comes to most of us in very ordinary ways.

The shepherds got an angelic announcement, but everyone else just got a shepherd.

When an angel shows up it's really *not* difficult to pay attention. When an angel appears in the Bible people fall to the ground and they feel the searing brilliance of their glory. It's very hard to do anything else but notice that you have an angel speaking to you. Am I right? That my experience and I'm sure yours as well...

Those who have received an angelic announcement have shown little difficulty paying attention to what the angels have to say. The shepherds heard this news from an angel, but everyone else gets the news from a shepherd.

Shepherds, as we've spoken about before, were not scholars. They're not officials. They're not even soldiers. They were just ordinary people. In fact, according to ancient documents, the testimony of a shepherd wasn't viewed as credible testimony in court. And they're the ones entrusted with sharing this message.

Do you know what this remind me of? When you look at the authors of the books and letters that make up the Bible, we see men like Moses, Isaiah, Peter and Paul. When we look at these people who wrote the Bible we see that they had revelations. Some of them did see angels. They saw visions. It was very easy for them to pay attention. They saw the spectacular, but the rest of us just get a book. Just a book, which, by the way, is extremely easy *not* to pay much attention to. It's a hard book to read. It's is.

In the New Year we're launching into a series called Garden to City, and we'll be going through the entire Bible in a year together. We did this four years ago- how many of you remember? At that time we encouraged everyone to read through the entire Bible in a year and there was all this momentum out of the gate, right? We're reading along each day and going strong and then you get to about Leviticus 3 and it's over. So many attempts to read through the Bible die in Leviticus 3.

It's a hard book to read. You have to ask questions. You have to pay attention. Most people get the word of God in very ordinary ways- in ways that it would be very easy not to really listen and attend to.

Mary, remember, has heard from an angel, but we're told in verse 19, "*Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often.*" I love this about Mary. She didn't say, 'I don't have to listen to these shepherds. Shepherds, for crying out loud! I had angel come directly to me.' No! She not only listened to the angel but she listens to the shepherds too.

And what does she do? She ponders and treasures. That's her response in the version I grew up familiar with. "Mary pondered these things often and treasured them up in her heart." The word "thought" from our text, (or "ponder" from the older translation) that word in the Greek literally means, "to put into context or to connect." It's means looking at how something fits with everything else. Mary was thinking out the implications of all that she had experienced. She was connecting the dots. But when the text says, "Mary kept all these things in her heart," (or in the old translation

“treasured these things”) that’s dealing with emotion. It’s dealing with the heart. To treasure literally means, “to keep something alive.” Like keeping a fire alive by kindling it. To treasure something is to savor it, to relish it and keep it alive.

In the text we’re told that Mary doesn’t just think about what she’s heard from God- it’s not all head knowledge- she fans the flame in her heart as well. She takes it all in.

Why is it important to know all this about Mary’s response? Listen, do not underestimate your ability to hear and not listen to the word of God.

You remember the parable of the sowers? It’s where Jesus talks about the seed as the word of God and it falls on some soil and nothing happens at all, in other places it springs up but withers away with the sun. In some places it’s choked by weeds, what’s that all about? Most people’s hearts hear but don’t listen. Some people just don’t believe the message, but some say ‘Oh I believe it’ but they don’t treasure it and think about it- it doesn’t come in and changes their lives.

Do you want to be like the crowd who just marvel at the shepherd’s news, or do you want to be like Mary?

Or let me put it another way. I’m glad you’re here. Every time you join us for service you have an opportunity to hear God’s word spoken and taught. Those of us doing the teaching, it’s our job to develop a skill- to be interesting. It’s our job to be compelling and interesting and persuasive. But can you hold your own attention with the word of God? Can you interest yourself? Can you sit down and treasure and ponder and bring the truth of Scripture into your heart until it catches fire in your mind and your will and your soul? That’s what Luke is suggesting.

We need to listen well, and we need to investigate the evidence. That’s what the shepherds do. They hear this angelic announcement- it’s unavoidable, it’s awesome, terrifying even. But give them credit. They didn’t just assume it was true. If I heard an angelic announcement telling me about an event somewhere, man I think I’m going to take their word for it. The shepherds’ first inclination is to investigate.

There’s one reason why this is worth noting... They risked their sheep. Their livelihood was at stake. You remember several weeks ago when we talked about the value of sheep. When Jesus tells the story of the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go out and find the one that is lost, everyone in that culture understood how important that missing sheep was. So these boys leaving the sheep in the fields is no small thing.

The shepherds were willing to sacrifice their jobs to investigate what they had heard, and they did it without a second thought.

In verse 15, *“When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger.”*

Listen, what the shepherds heard from the angels that night was glorious. It was an experience they never would forget. And yet, if they hadn’t gone to see it for themselves they would have missed out on actually meeting their Savior face to face.

As good as the angelic visitation was, it wasn't the same as looking into the eyes of that newborn baby, knowing that He would be their Savior. They got to see the Messiah- the Promised One.

The shepherds examined the angels report, and if our faith is going to be strong, we need to investigate what we are hearing and reading too. There are people who will say that the Bible is an antiquated book, and they will want to know why you would want to believe it. Do you have a response? Can you give a reason for the hope you profess?

In Acts 17 we learn about a group of Christ followers in a town called Berea. It's said there that they were more noble than the followers from Thessalonica because, they searched the Scriptures to see if what they were hearing was true.

The shepherds listened to what the angels had to say, then they investigated what they had heard to see if it was true, and we need to do the same.

The final thing the shepherds did is this: they shared about what they had heard. The shepherds shared this Good News. Enthusiastically. With everyone. No one had to command them to do it. They weren't slinking around. The glory the shepherds witnessed was not for them alone, it was a moment that needed to be shared. It was too good to keep to themselves.

Please note what they did not share. They had no idea this baby would some day die on a cross. They didn't explain any of that. They didn't share the chapters and verses where the prophets of old had foretold of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem. No!

The shepherds explained what had happened to them. They had witnessed angels telling of the birth of the Messiah, and when they went to investigate they had found the baby in a manger just as they had been told. It was true, so they shared it.

Did you know that the people who are most effective at sharing the Good News about Jesus are usually new Christians? Does that surprise you? Why is that the case? It's not because they are knowledgeable about every detail of faith. Obviously not. They're "new" Christians. Most only know the basics, but they're excited about their faith, and what they've come to experience in Jesus. So they share out of their joy.

You don't have to be an expert on doctrine and Greek words to introduce someone to the Hope of the world. You simply need to share what you've found. Forgiveness. Transformation. Grace. Share what you've experienced.

Use Harbor as a resource. That's why we exist, To Help People Find Their Way Back to God. Invite someone to join you here. This Wednesday night is your perfect opportunity. A Christmas Service at Chelmsford High School- it's the perfect chance to invite someone you know so they can hear about God's grace. I hope you'll take one of the invitations that we've attached to the programs and that you'll give it to someone on your street or at your work. Invite them to join us. Sharing Christmas can be as easy as that.

Some of us shy away from this and there are several reasons why this happens. For some of us we no longer see what God has done in our lives as extraordinary- it's become common. If that's true of you, can I encourage you? Return to your First Love. Draw back to the days when your faith was new and your joy in the Lord was all consuming. Imagine sharing that experience with someone who has yet to learn of God's gracious gift to us in Jesus. Imagine having an opportunity to introduce them to the Savior.

For some of us, we hesitate to share the Good News because, frankly, we're afraid. We're nervous about how the news will be received- about the way people will look at us. It's an understandable fear.

Anyone who's ever gotten up the courage to ask another person out knows how nerve wracking the moments leading up to that are, but we move past that fear because the benefits outweigh the negatives, right? If they say 'no,' we may be temporarily wounded, but we'll survive. If they say 'yes,' the heavens open and the angels sing. It's the same with sharing our faith. Of course the fear of rejection looms, but consider what you're inviting a person to experience. The benefits outweigh the negatives every time. Every time! Don't allow fear to prevent you from sharing what you've experienced in Christ.

When you support Harbor, you are partnering with us in sharing the glorious news of what God has done for us in Christ.