**Unexpected First Responders Christmas Day 2021 Luke 2:1-20**

Startling news can throw us off balance! An illness, a marriage, a robbery, a pregnancy, a divorce, an accident, an inheritance; such events require a response. The shepherds that first Christmas received startling news and responded enthusiastically. We may wonder why God chose to convey this news to a group of shepherds.

Many characters in the Old Testament were shepherds. The term shepherd is often also used metaphorically. This was common in the ancient Near East. It pointed to people who were caring civic leaders, demonstrating strong devotion to their duties, similar to shepherds caring night and day for their sheep.[[1]](#footnote-1) The image of the long awaited Messiah was also linked to this one being a good shepherd of the people.[[2]](#footnote-2)

By New Testament times, in the wider community, however, there had been a general devaluation of shepherds as group in society. Former civic privileges were withdrawn from them and the pious were cautioned about their interactions with them. They were often seen to be untrustworthy, dishonest, and their position in society plummeted. In fact, in the Midrash on Psalm 23 it states, *“No position in the world is as despised as that of a shepherd”.[[3]](#footnote-3)* Shepherds certainly belonged to the peasant class of society. They often needed to hire out their services to others, in order to survive.

In this context, the fact that God’s royal entourage of angels delivered the most amazing news to a group of shepherds, seems such a strange choice. We have no record of angels appearing in Bethlehem, or angels communicating with the Wise men, yet a whole host of angels appear to the shepherds.

In Luke’s gospel there is a strong emphasis on the poor and their responsiveness to God. Jesus’ teaching encompasses blessings towards the poor and the hungry, *“Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*
In Matthew’s gospel read about blessings to the *“Poor in spirit”,* and those who *“hunger and thirst for righteousness”[[5]](#footnote-5),* but Luke just speaks of the *poor and the hungry*, they are especially blessed.

God speaks to us through most unexpected people and in strange places, but what we do with what God says to us is most important.

We can’t really know why God chose these shepherds and perhaps that is part of the answer – God may choose anyone, at any time to have a most significant role in history, to be the first to witness a most extraordinary event, to become part of a greater story which will turn the world upside down.

Encountering an angel understandably provoked fear in the recipients. Mary, Zechariah and the shepherds all responded to their angel messengers in fear, even great fear. They all needed reassurance. For Mary and Zechariah, even when reassured, they had questions about how this could be happening to them. Yet after their initial shock, the shepherds display remarkable enthusiasm to accept what they have been told and to go and see for themselves.

The Shepherds responded in faith, promptly and went, regardless of the absurdity or inconvenience, they went to see what had happened. They told others about their experience and about what they had been told about Jesus and their audience were amazed. Then when they left, they worshipped God, and praised God for all they had seen and heard. The shepherds moved from a position of great fear, to one of great joy, and in their joy, they shared this great good news with those around them.

Mary also responded to the message of the shepherds, and we read that she *“treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart”[[6]](#footnote-6).*

A woman tells a story of a damaged nativity scene which has pride of place in her office. Years before the woman had been bitterly struggling with her parents decision to divorce after 36 years of marriage. She was doing some shopping just prior to Christmas when she became distracted by a little girl arguing with her mother. It was apparent by the state of their clothes that they and the baby with them were very poor. The mother was telling the little girl to “get that thing out of her mouth”. The girl was saying she was just giving the broken baby Jesus a kiss. She held the little broken doll to her cheek and started singing *“Away in a manger”* to it. The little girl was pleading with her mother to buy the tiny broken doll so they could have it to help them celebrate Christmas. The mother was getting angry, but then she went over and hugged her child, and began to cry. The child seemed to understand her mother’s tears, and comforted her mother asking her not to cry. She apologised for being naughty and said she didn’t need the broken baby Jesus. The mother said *“You know I don’t have enough money for anything extra right now,* but maybe Santa will bring something special for her. As the girl went to put the broken baby Jesus on the shelf she said, “I don’t need this broken baby Jesus because my Sunday school teacher says that baby Jesus lives in your heart!”

The observer hurriedly picked up the nativity set and the broken Jesus and bought it, asking the cashier to give the baby Jesus to the little girl ahead of her in the queue. The little girl accepted the gift from the cashier and gave the baby another kiss.

The remainder of the nativity scene reminds the observer each year that God comes to us in unexpected places and through unexpected people. [[7]](#footnote-7)May we be open and responsive to the unexpected touch of God through others this Christmas, and may we also be prepared to be that unexpected source of the touch of God to others with whom we interact.

Like the shepherds we may have the opportunity to have a conversation about why Jesus is important. We may have a chance to share our joy with others and perhaps to share the source of the greatest joy at Christmas.

Perhaps like Mary we should take some time to sit and ponder the message of Jesus, to give it time to work upon us and become more fully the treasure of our hearts.

The Saviour

A babe was born so long ago

The heaven was filled with glory, so

The shepherds in a distant field

Were all amazed and humbly kneeled

As angels sang and echoed ‘round

The story of the Saviour found.

And wise men too had heard the news,

So set out straight to see Him too,

That babe of Bethlehem, far away,

Encased in bands of soft mown hay

And all was still and full of light

When Jesus came that starry night

To fill our lives with joy above

The essence of His constant love.

Marjorie Langford

1. Colin Brown, (Ed.) *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology Vol 3,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Press, 1982) 564 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Colin Brown, (Ed.) *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology Vol 3,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Press, 1982) 566 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Colin Brown, (Ed.) *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology Vol 3,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Press, 1982) 566 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Luke 6:20-21. NRSV. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Matthew 5:3, 6. NRSV. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Luke 2:19 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jeannie S. Williams, “Where’s the baby Jesus” in Max Lucado et al (Eds) *Christmas Stories for the Heart,* (Sister, Oregon: Multnomah Books, 1997) 68-73 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)