

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
December 24, 2021

Living in Heaven's Spotlight

Luke 2:1-20

Kizzmekia Corbett, Barney Graham, Katalin Kariko, and Drew Weissman. Until recently, most people didn't even know their names. Now they're on the cover of a national publication. TIME Magazine has named them Heroes of the Year for 2021. The four of them are scientists who were instrumental in the development of the COVID-19 vaccines. Their work with a genetic material called messenger RNA was critical in creating the shots that so many of us have had put into our arms.

Though they're now in the spotlight, Corbett, Graham, Kariko, and Weissman spent years working in relative obscurity, researching, doing lab experiments, and publishing papers. Like so much of what happens in science, their accomplishments built upon wisdom and knowledge accumulated over years of investigation and analysis. They hadn't sought or planned on attaining a place in the public eye, but their discoveries converged with humankind's need for a weapon to fight COVID-19, and now these four doctors' faces and stories are out there for the world to see.

The internet has made it possible for unknown stories to become international news faster than you can say, "Christ is born." The shepherds didn't have the benefit of cyberspace, but they did the best they could with what they had to start getting the word out, and in the process became the first messengers of the Messiah's arrival.

Because the shepherds are so well-known to us, we don't think much about the obscurity of their lives prior to that night in the fields near Bethlehem. This time of the year, the shepherds are all over the place. They're on stage in church pageants. They're on Christmas cards. They're on front lawns. They're hanging from Christmas trees. They're sitting on mantles. They're posted on websites. No Christmas would be complete without the shepherds. In Luke's version of the nativity, the shepherds are heroes. The heavenly spotlight called the "glory of the Lord" shines on them (v. 9).

But apart from these few verses of fame, the shepherds went about their lives pretty anonymously. They certainly didn't have a prominent place in society. Sometimes the shepherds are viewed as a scorned or feared part of the population. But this may not be as true as some have assumed. One thing seems fairly certain though, namely, that shepherds were among the lowly, the outcast, and the marginalized of society. If you were going to secure prominent, highly regarded people to spread the news about the arrival of the king of the universe, you wouldn't post a recruiting ad on the website for the local shepherds association. Better to search among people with a higher profile and a larger network of influence.

At the beginning of tonight's text, Luke takes us to the center of influence, Rome, where Caesar Augustus has ordered that the empire's population be counted. This was often done for political purposes or military readiness. It was a display of power, a reminder of who was in charge. From the point of view of this present world, sovereignty is being exercised by the emperor, who has decided that there needs to be a census. But from the point of view of God's realm, which is now arriving in lowly little Bethlehem, sovereignty belongs to

a helpless infant who gets visited by a band of sheep-tending nobodies. Clearly, God's idea of what constitutes prominence and importance is different from the world's.

A few years ago, Octavia Drughi wrote a piece on the 10 most expensive hospitals to give birth. It included this description of some maternity suites at Cedar-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles:

For "just" \$4,000 per day, you get the Deluxe Maternity Package, a three-room suite with two bathrooms. Forget all about that nasty hospital food. Your menu will include plenty of fresh fruit, muffins, and chilled juices, fit for the queen you are. Plus, they offer bedside salon services, like hairstylist, manicures, and pedicures. After all, who wants to leave the hospital looking like they've just had a baby? It is where Kourtney Kardashian, Kate Hudson, Victoria Beckham, and Rachel Zoe gave birth, in lighted rooms with soft colors and comfortable beds, with huge bathtubs, and deluxe food services.¹

Imagine the shepherds showing up in the lobby of Cedar-Sinai. No, you can't bring those smelly sheep into this hospital. It violates our visitation policy.

It's a long way from a luxurious Hollywood birthing center to a cramped Bethlehem family room shared with the household's animals, the kind of place where Jesus may very well have been born. Notice how God makes a humble, unpampered entrance into the world, and in the process overturns our notions of greatness. In Luke's account of Jesus' birth, the only spotlight that matters is the one that shines from heaven, and it's aimed at the shepherds, some of society's lowest-ranking people.

Today, we live in a celebrity-saturated culture. There's a constant barrage of news about who has a new TV show, who has married whom, who is now divorced from whom, who has a new book out, who has a newly sculpted body, who is the best dressed, and who is the sexiest man or woman alive. Americans' appetite for celebrity, coupled with expanding forms of media, has created an atmosphere where being in the public eye is one of life's highest pursuits. The old quip, "In the future, everyone will have their 15 minutes of fame," endures.

And thanks to developments in technology and the explosion of social media, those few minutes of fame are now even more attainable. With a little bit of ambition, and a smartphone in hand, you can now put yourself out there to the whole world. In some cases, the right video, photo, opinion, or quotation can turn you into an internet sensation, an influencer known to millions around the globe. With some creativity, the right connections, and just a few clicks of your mouse or taps on your screen, you can go from living in obscurity to being internationally recognizable.

In the early 1960s, Daniel Boorstin wrote a book titled *The Image*, in which he described and analyzed advertising's influence on American culture. He spent part of the book tracing the emergence of the phenomenon of celebrity, which he famously called "being well-known for one's well-known-ness." According to Boorstin, celebrities' "chief claim to fame is their fame itself."² In other words, they're famous for being famous.

I certainly don't view the shepherds as celebrities, in the modern sense, but in a fame-thirsty environment like ours, I do think it helps to reflect on how the shepherds in Luke's story went from being so unknown to being so well-known. I'm guessing that if you ask many people, including some who don't even profess the Christian faith, about the key figures in the Christmas story, odds are they may include the shepherds in that list of characters. No matter where in the world, in whatever language, the good news of Jesus' birth is being read, performed, or proclaimed on this sacred night, the shepherds will make an appearance.

But they won't stay in the limelight for long. Soon the sermons will conclude, the songs will fade, the nativity sets will be boxed up, and the shepherd costumes and cardboard sheep will be put away until next year. We won't hear much, if anything, about the shepherds until another Christmas rolls around.

In one respect, this is in keeping with the way Luke tells the story. In his account of our Savior's arrival, the shepherds appear, do what they're instructed to do, and then disappear. They're not like the shepherds in our church Christmas programs, whether adult or children, who get to step up and take another bow before an applauding congregation. No, the shepherds in Luke's account are too busy applauding God. At the conclusion of the narrative, they're caught up in evangelizing and worshiping. And that's the last we hear of them.

It's no accident that we devote this evening to worship. It helps us keep ourselves in perspective. Remember that the glory that shone around the shepherds that night was the glory of the Lord. And that's what we're all about this night, God's glory, not our own. Several years ago, a few research psychologists looked into the relationship between religiosity and celebrity worship. The final paper that emerged from their work was titled, "Thou Shalt Worship No Other Gods—Unless They Are Celebrities," in which the researchers noted that "as religiosity increases, for both men and women, the tendency to 'worship' celebrities decreases," though many religious people still try to do both.³

As I stressed in my sermon a couple of Sundays ago, in the life of the church we're all about God's fame, not our own. Our life together, and our mission in the world, begin with the assumption and conviction that God is the center of reality, and that we are here to proclaim and promote his character and purpose. Like Mary, we declare, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." (Luke 1:46). Now, more than ever, we need to follow Mary's lead. And by "we," I mean followers of Jesus Christ. The fact is, we live in a time when Christians, churches, and their leaders often grasp for power, or pursue prestige, or seek national prominence, or otherwise magnify themselves in ways that conform to, rather than contradict, the culture of celebrity in which we live.

Now that doesn't mean we should be completely silent and invisible. We're still gathered to see, and still sent to announce, who this infant is and why he has been born. One preacher tells about a five year old who was in his first Christmas pageant. He wasn't a lead shepherd, just a common shepherd standing in the back. But when it was time for the Nativity, he made his way to the front where he could see. And having seen, he stepped to the footlights, looked out, and cried out to his parents, "Mommy! Daddy! Mary had her baby, and it's a boy!"⁴

Tonight, we need the glory of the Lord to once again shine on us and around us. And we need the boldness to declare what we've experienced. But that doesn't mean we turn the spotlight on ourselves. Instead, the hiddenness of the Savior's birth, and the humility of the shepherd messengers, remind us that our living for Christ and our laboring for God's kingdom usually happen out of the limelight, in obscure ways and obscure places known only to the Lord. That's because in the reign of God, faithfulness is valued more than fame, and a life of significance is prized above a life of celebrity. So we keep on worshiping, and working, and witnessing, in word and deed, trusting that we do so in full view of a God who looks upon us with favor, and who gathers our ordinary and unfamous lives into his redeeming purpose through Jesus Christ.

¹ Octavia Drughi, "The 10 Most Expensive Hospitals to Give Birth." TheRichest.com. April 1, 2014. <https://www.therichest.com/luxury/the-10-most-expensive-hospitals-to-give-birth/> (December 16, 2021).

² Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 1992) n.p.

³ Jake Halpern, *Fame Junkies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008) 164-165.

⁴ Bruce Thielemann, "Glory to God in the Lowest." Preaching Today, Tape No. 75.