

**Text: Luke 2:15-21**

**Theme: Series-The King is Here: The Angels Announced It**

**Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 01/01/2017 at 10.30am**

### **Two Responses to Christmas**

The angels have gone away into heaven, and now the shepherds respond. They take the news of a Saviour, and the wonder of what they have just witnessed, and they decide that, just maybe, they should go and see for themselves. Our text says that they went "with haste." It only seems reasonable. You have angelic visitors make the announcement of something you have been waiting for all of your lives, and your parents before you, and their parents before them, it just makes sense that you are going to hurry on over to see the thing.

And what did they find?

They found Mary, and Joseph, and a new-born baby lying in a manger all trussed up in swaddling cloth like they used to do with babies back then. There was nothing remarkable about the scene. Some of them may have had children born in a stable, sleeping in a feed-trough too. What was remarkable was that the angels had told them that this One would be there. They told them who this One was! He is "**Christ, the Lord.**" That is like saying "***the Messiah, who is God Himself!***"

So, how did they respond? They told everyone. They told Mary, and they told Joseph, and they told the others who might have been standing around, and they told people they passed on their way back to their flocks. Once they saw it, and knew that it was just what the angels said, they couldn't keep it to themselves. They were so excited and happy that they had to tell. And they returned to their fields and flocks that night praising God and glorifying Him for all that He had done, for all that they had seen, and for Him letting them in on it!

Shepherds generally came from the base elements of society, and in those days, they were so little trusted that a shepherd's testimony would not be accepted in a courtroom. Most shepherds were considered on a par with vagrants, and con men, oftentimes on the lowest rung of the economic ladder and had little or no formal education.

What a remarkable change came to the Shepherds, and it has got a lot to say about the character of God. God will do his work through anybody who is available to Him. He does not look for qualified people but qualifies those He calls and sends. On that night in Bethlehem, outside of Joseph and Mary, the only people in the world who knew Christ had been born were the shepherds. After the "400 silent years," when God did not speak through prophets, he now speaks through angels to lowly shepherds on a remote hillside outside a tiny Judean village. We can trust that God had a specific purpose for this shepherd audience and the work they perform suggests a reason. These men who watched the sheep meant for the slaughter received a message about the ultimate lamb who would take the sin of the world through his death and resurrection.

It wasn't a likely way to win the world. Certainly, not the way we would have done it. If we had planned it, Jesus would have been born in Jerusalem, to a wealthy family, and attended by the high and mighty. That way no one would doubt that the Son of God had come to earth. But God's ways and ours are not the same. He chose to reveal the news to the shepherds first. After their initial (and understandable) fear, they responded in faith. They believed the angel, they immediately went to Bethlehem, and they found the baby Jesus. Everything was just as the angel said it would be.

**It wasn't the encounter with the angels that set the shepherds talking to everyone they met, but the encounter with the baby. The shepherds tongues were loosed.** They were no longer concerned about their credibility but consumed by the wonder and greatness of the Baby that was to be the Saviour of the world.

You might have expected the visit by the angels to have filled the shepherds with such awe and wonder that they couldn't help worshipping God. After all, it isn't every day that you're visited by a heavenly choir who relay a direct message from God. First, they heard and saw the spectacular angelic revelation. Then, when they went to Bethlehem, they discovered the Saviour of the world in a feeding-trough in a rough, outdoor barn. The birth and the revelation didn't seem to go together. Yet there it was—all from the hand of God.

Have you had an encounter with the Jesus Christ, the Emmanuel, God with us? Do not look down upon yourself as unworthy. If you make room for Jesus in your heart and life, accepting his offer of reconciliation with God through His sacrifice on the cross for your sins, one of the first things He does is to set your tongues loose to praise Him and tell others about him.

That was one reaction to Christmas. Evangelism, singing, praises, and sheer delight. Mary, by contrast, said nothing. She treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart, which is perhaps an unusual behaviour for a mother of the Saviour of the world. Many mothers can't wait to sing the praises of their children, and tell anyone who will listen all about their child's remarkable qualities. But for Mary it was too important and too deep to be casually tossed around in idle chatter. Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart, using them as the precious basis for all her future thought and way of being.

### ***The Incarnation of the Son of God***

Then, of course, we who don't have the excitement of the shepherds, can also share in their joy that this One, lying in a manger on that first Christmas, was born **to save His people from their sins**. He is the Messiah, the Christ. The shepherds didn't need to be told what a Saviour was, or why they needed saving. Their lives were harsh and painful. They knew nothing of our conveniences and comforts. They faced their sinfulness in ways we cannot imagine. They made the sacrifices of their sheep and lambs to remind them of their sins, and their terrible cost. They heard regularly about the hope of Israel, and their shame in being a conquered people. Forgiveness, freedom, and rescue were important dreams and hopes to them.

We need a saviour no less than they did. We are just not accustomed to thinking about it, except in church, and some of us find it inconvenient when the minister makes us face that reality too often or too clearly. But the baby wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in a manger was born to be our saviour, and He is. He lifted sin and death from our shoulders, and bore it to the cross in our place. He died for what we have done, so that we might live with Him in heavenly glory. The thought should thrill us and excite us, but, frankly, we have grown accustomed to it, and many times we don't "feel" it much at all. If you do feel it and get excited, praise the Lord.

The shepherds could perhaps be described as the first evangelists, as they were the first people to tell others about Jesus. Isn't our God gracious? Just like the story of the shepherds, Mary and the other women were the first people to witness the resurrection of Jesus Christ and were commissioned to go and tell others about it.

Whatever your situation, God is giving you an assignment to turn your gaze on Jesus who died for you and rose again. As you behold him, be filled with wonder and appreciation and love and go tell others about him- through your lives, your words and your testimonies. May God give you the grace as you live for him this new year.

If we start with Christmas Day, December 25, and count eight days, we come to today, January 1. It is on the eighth day of Christmas that Jesus was circumcised and received his name. The story is told in a single verse of the gospel we just heard.

The shepherds, summoned by an angel, have visited the baby in the manger. They return home, praising God for what has happened. Then comes the focus of today's celebration. "When eight days were fulfilled for the circumcision of the child," we hear from the gospel, "his name was called Jesus, which was given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." Circumcision brings with it the shedding of blood. What happens to Jesus on his eighth day is the first small step in the shedding of his blood for the redemption of the world. His blood will be shed abundantly when his life draws to its close.

- In the Garden of Gethsemane, he will pray so urgently to know God's will that his sweat will resemble clots of blood falling to the ground.
- Blood will drip when he is scourged with whips by Roman soldiers, and when they press a crown of thorn branches deep into his head.
- Blood will drip as he carries his cross on the long walk to Calvary, and when spikes are driven through his feet and hands.
- And blood will drip even after he is dead, when the sharp point of a Roman lance cuts into his heart.
- The blood shed at his circumcision is only a small beginning, the promise of what awaits him.
- But something more than circumcision happens to Jesus on his eighth day. He receives his name.

Among the Jews, circumcision is when a boy receives his name.

The name Jesus receives is heavy with significance. It is the same as that of Joshua, the Old Testament hero who leads Israel into the land of freedom. The name means literally "The Lord is salvation." This is the name that Gabriel, at the Annunciation, tells Mary to name her child.

And so, it is not a name thought up by the baby's parents. It is a name that comes from God. The name of the Saviour, the salvation he brings, and he himself all come from God.