

Christmas Feels - Wonder

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Sermon Audio file

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We are in an Advent series that I've entitled "Christmas Feels" in which we are looking at some of the emotions of Christmas

As you know, we are people that are often affected by our emotions

I am so glad that God made us as emotional beings!

Can you imagine a life without emotions? Not being able to love, or grieve, or feel happiness and even sadness

Honestly that's not a life that I would be interested in at all!

I am grateful that God made us with the capacity to feel emotion, yet at the same time I think all of you will agree with me when I say that I've learned the hard way that I cannot always trust my emotions

Our emotions often lie to us or mislead us, yet even though we know that we often times allow our emotions to influence us way more than they should

The Christmas season is often one filled with emotions, and we are taking a look at some of the emotions surrounding the birth of Jesus

Today I want to take a look at an emotion that I think we need to experience more often - Wonder

The dictionary defines Wonder as:

To be filled with admiration, amazement, or awe

The emotion excited by what is strange and surprising; a feeling of surprised or puzzled interest, sometimes tinged with admiration

Think back to a time when you experienced wonder - it's a great feeling isn't it?

Today I want to take a look at 2 instances in Scripture where people felt wonder

One instance is a story that is pretty familiar and is with a group of people rather than an individual

We're going to take a look at The Shepherds

Luke 2:8-20 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that

will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

This is a story that, to be honest with you, totally blows my mind

The Messiah, the Savior of the world, has been born and God is making the announcement of His birth

Who does God tell?

Who does he invite to come and see the new baby?

Not who you would expect at all

You would expect the announcement to be made to all the important people of the day - the Roman emperor, kings and governors, the high priest and other important religious figures

But that's not what God does

There is only one announcement of Christ's birth recorded in the Scriptures, only one invitation from God to anyone to come visit Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus.

And that one invitation goes to a bunch of uneducated, smelly, low-class, social and religious outcasts - a bunch of shepherds.

Let me tell you a bit about shepherds.

They were the last people you'd expect God to take notice of.

First of all, they were religious outcasts - According to Jewish religious law, these men were unclean.

Their line of work prevented them from participating in the feasts and holy days that made up the Jewish religious calendar.

Why? Well, somebody had to watch the sheep.

When everyone else was making the trip to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the temple, or to participate in one of the annual feasts, they were out in the fields, watching over the sheep.

Domesticated sheep cannot take care of themselves - someone had to do it

It wasn't really their fault. But they were looked down on, from a religious point of view.

Whatever else might have been in their hearts, they weren't able to participate fully in the religious life of the community.

Not only that, but shepherds were borderline social outcasts.

Since they were constantly on the move to find new pasture for their flocks, they were looked on with suspicion.

They were often accused of being thieves and they were not permitted to give testimony in a legal proceeding, because their word wasn't considered trustworthy.

And on top of all that, they really didn't have much contact with other people.

This was not a 40-hour a week job. They didn't come home at night. They were with the sheep 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

During the day, they led the sheep to grass and water. They watched while the sheep grazed.

They kept an eye out for predators like wolves. And at night, they actually slept in the sheep pen with the sheep to guard against theft and animal attack.

A good shepherd could identify each one of his sheep by sight. He knew his sheep and they knew him.

Being a shepherd was lonely, wearisome, usually very boring and tedious, and sometimes extremely dangerous.

It gave them a lot of contact with sheep, but very little exposure to people.

They had hours and hours with nothing to do but watch sheep eat grass. [Does that make you feel any better about your job?].

So why? Why did God announce the birth of Jesus to these shepherds, these social and religious outcasts?

Were the shepherds especially religious, unusually holy?

In spite of the fact they couldn't participate in organized religion, were they just really really religious?

Maybe, but probably not

There is nothing in the text to indicate that they were more religious than anyone else.

Were they perhaps expecting this, were they looking to God to visit them?

Could they have anticipated this in any way? No.

In fact, if I'm a shepherd, I'm probably convinced God has no idea who I even am.

I don't sacrifice at the temple, I don't show up for the feasts, I don't go to synagogue; and my deepest theological discussions are with a bunch of stupid sheep.

If God does know who I am, he can't think much of me.

So why did God send the angels first to the shepherds?

I obviously don't know why, but I can certainly make a guess

I think God wanted to show that His love does not discriminate on the basis of class, or wealth, or social standing.

He does not respect kings and princes more than hourly laborers, he does not value priests and pastors above the people in the congregation.

God does not show favoritism; He does not give preferential treatment to one group of people over another.

His love is available to all

I think that God choice of the shepherds to be the first to receive the news of Christ's birth, was to show that Jesus was not going to be the Savior of only the political and social and religious elite.

Jesus was not going to be the Savior only of kings and governors, or popes and priests.

Jesus is the Savior of all equally, he doesn't give preference to any group or any class.

He doesn't discriminate on the basis of intelligence, or education, or wealth, or profession, or political power, or social standing, or any of the other qualities that human beings judge by.

His love is offered indiscriminately to anyone who wants to receive it

The second instance of wonder is with an individual that often gets overlooked in the narrative of Jesus' birth

Honestly, he's my favorite character in the story!

His name is Simeon and his story immediately follows the story of the shepherds in Luke 2

Luke 2:21-35 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. 22 When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all people, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." 33 The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Here we are introduced to a man named Simeon.

This is the only place in the Bible that he is mentioned, and we really do not know that much about him

What we do know, however, is pretty amazing!

We are told that he was waiting for the consolation of Israel

In other words, he was waiting for God to send the Messiah, who would deliver Israel from Rome and set up a kingdom that would never end

In this, Simeon was not unlike many that were alive that day

What makes Simeon stand out, however, are two things that the Bible says about him

First, Scripture describes Simeon as “righteous and devout”

That’s quite an honor – but even though this was an honor there were certainly other righteous and devout men at that time

What really makes Simeon stand out is this phrase “and the Holy Spirit was upon him”

This might not sound like a big deal to us

The reason being that when we gave our lives to God the Holy Spirit came to live inside us

More than that though, for those of us who have received the Baptism in the Holy Spirit we have access to the power of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives

So, having the Holy Spirit is not that unusual to us, but it was a huge deal in Simeon’s day

The Holy Spirit did not fall upon everyone, and when the Holy Spirit did fall, it usually stayed for only a brief period of time

The implication in Scripture here is that Simeon was one of the very rare Old Covenant people who lived in the power of the Holy Spirit

He was, in other words, a very Godly man who had the favor of God upon him!

So much so that Simeon received a promise from God - that he would not die until he saw the Messiah!

If you put yourself into the time period that Simeon lived in that makes the promise even more wonderful!

People were anxious for the Messiah to appear, and here God is promising Simeon that he would actually see the Messiah before he died!

Again, this might not seem like too big of a deal to us, but this was HUGE to Simeon!

For several hundred years Israel had been in shambles and under the rule of other nations

Currently they were under Roman occupation, and things were not going that well

Everyone was longing for the Messiah, and then God gives Simeon a promise

Can you imagine receiving such a promise from God?

Being so close to God that He tells you about something amazing that’s about to happen?

We don’t know how long Simeon had waited for the promise that God had given him

It may have been years, or it may have only been a few days

I tend to think that it was probably a few years

I can picture in my mind Simeon walking through the temple courts on a regular basis, searching the crowds for a glimpse of the promised Messiah

“Is He here yet? How much longer God?”

It may have even gotten to the point that Simeon was beginning to doubt that he had heard the voice of the Lord – that maybe this promise was not from God after all

But then one day, something amazing happened!

The Holy Spirit said to Simeon “Hey! It’s time! Go to the temple courts!”

I can only imagine how excited Simeons must have been!

I don’t know what exactly he expected, but when his eyes fell on the baby Jesus the Holy Spirit said “That’s him!”

This baby boy was the Christ, the Messiah, God’s Promised One!

Then Simeon got to do what I only dream of doing – he got to hold Jesus in his arms!

Can you imagine what it must have been like?

Simeon then spoke words of praise and prophecy that I’m sure were not lost on Mary and Joseph

I’m sure they only confirmed what they already knew – that this child was the Messiah!

To paraphrase Simeon’s words, he said that he could now die in peace because he had seen Israel’s salvation!

Not only that, but that this baby would be a light of revelation to the Gentiles – that’s you and me folks

Mary and Joseph marveled at these words, but Simeon was not done

Through the power of the Holy Spirit he continued to prophesy

(On screen already)

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Wow, what powerful words!

Jesus certainly did cause the falling and rising of many in Israel didn’t He?

He was most definitely spoken against, and Jesus did reveal the thoughts of many hearts

Then Simeon prophecies about the death of Jesus when he said to Mary “and a sword will pierce your own soul too”

I wonder if, 33 years later, Mary remembered these words as she watched Jesus be crucified?

We read stories like this and think about how awesome it would be to live a life of faith like that

But then many people, myself included, often think "I could never be like that"

My question is why not?

Why can't we be just as devoted to God as Simeon and Anna were?

They didn't have anything that we don't have

We serve the same God they did - the same Holy Spirit is available to us

So why not?

Some of you may think that you're not special enough - that you're not important or particularly religious

I'm sure the shepherds felt that way too, yet God chose them

The shepherds and Simeon got to experience the wonder of encountering Jesus

You can too!

Like the shepherds I encourage you to look for Him, and if you do, like Simeon you will get to find Him and receive the peace and love that you are looking for