

Did you open your presents last night or this morning? How about your stockings – do you get to check those every day or just on Christmas morning? Is your tree artificial or real? Do you decorate the outside of your house as well as the inside? Christmas customs – every family has them and Christmas just wouldn't be the same without them, or so we think. While Christmas customs are meant to get us in the holiday spirit they can easily become Christmas chores – just another list of things we need to do. If that happened to you once again this year, it's time to set aside the customs and get back to the basics. Getting back to the Christmas basics is simple. Celebrate your Christmas as the shepherds did; just listen.

We hear from Luke chapter 2 verses 8-20:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” 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.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 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 the gospel of the Lord.

The night of that first Christmas must have seemed like any other night to the shepherds outside of Bethlehem. All the sheep had been gathered in and there was nothing left to do except to keep watch, visit with one another, and stay warm. That quiet routine, however, was shattered when an angel of the Lord burst onto the scene with the bright light of God's glory. Unasked and unexpected, that's how the angel arrived just as God continues to enter into hearts today.

How did the shepherds react to this heavenly invasion? They were terrified! That's not surprising is it? What's your first reaction when the phone rings in the middle of the night? You fear the worst don't you? It could be a friend calling to tell you that your son or daughter was in an accident, or Grandma to say that Grandpa isn't doing so well. In the same way the shepherds must have feared the worst when they saw God's messenger standing before them. Had he come to announce that it was Judgment Day? If so, were they ready to be judged by the righteous God?

But that's not why the angel had come. **“Do not be afraid.”** The angel said. **“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”** (Lk. 2:10, 11).

Just by listening to this message the attitude of the shepherds changed. Their fear was replaced with joy. The Savior had been born in Bethlehem just as the Old Testament prophets said he would be. By listening and taking to heart this message the shepherds learned that the Bible could be trusted. They also learned

that this child was not just human; he was God as he was called “the Lord.” But most of all the shepherds were overjoyed because this Savior had not just come to save a select group of people. The angel said that this news was for **“all people.”** No, there had been no tree, no treats, and no turkey but the shepherds were happy. What made that first Christmas such a merry one? Listening to the angel’s message.

In the same way our Christmas will be merry if we celebrate as the shepherds did – by listening and taking to heart the angel’s message. Jesus has come to bring peace to all. He did that by dying on the cross and forgiving all of our sins - sins of unfaithfulness, selfishness, laziness, anything we do, think, or say to show that we care about ourselves more than we care about God and others.

God’s forgiveness plan is like no other. God does not forgive only after we have reformed ourselves. Unasked and unexpected God intervened in history to forgive us and give us the promise of eternal life in heaven through faith in Jesus: God’s forgiveness gives us the reason to change our life.

But the shepherds weren’t just content to hear the message were they? They wanted to learn more about this Savior and so without delay they went to Bethlehem. It’s interesting isn’t it? They didn’t debate whether or not they had time to go, or whether it was convenient for them. They didn’t even worry about who would watch the sheep. They rushed to find out more about their Savior.

Friends, we too should not be content just to hear about the Savior but hurry to Bethlehem and see the Christ-child. Don’t be satisfied just to make note of Jesus once a year in the Christmas carols or in the Christmas Day service but come and learn about him often. God’s plan of salvation is awesome and has many facets to it. The more you listen to it and learn about it the more joy it brings into your life and will prepare you to face any kind of difficulty you may have to face.

While there is nothing wrong with enjoying our Christmas customs of opening presents or sharing Christmas dinner with loved ones, those customs can never replace the real reason for our joy at Christmas – the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior from sin. Don’t let the customs crowd out the basics. Celebrate like the shepherd’s by listening to the angel’s message. Amen.