

Announcement of the Shepherd-King

On July 22nd, 2013, Prince George, the son of William and Kate, was born. Before he was born, Welsh composer Paul Mealor composed a lullaby entitled "Sleep on" with lyrics by Irish composer Brendan Graham. Then a recording was made of it by New Zealand soprano Hayley Westenra as a gift for the baby. Special commemorative coins were issued by the Royal Mint of the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia.

On the day of his birth, a special sheet of paper was signed by the delivery team at St Mary's Hospital in Paddington, led by Alan Farthing, the royal surgeon-gynaecologist. The paper was brought out of the front door of the Lindo Wing in a red leather folder and handed to a driver who then delivered it to the Palace. Outside the palace, it was placed in a frame and put on a gold-painted easel to announce the birth.

In the capitals of Bermuda, the U.K., New Zealand and Canada, gun salutes signalled his birth. The bells of Westminster Abbey and many other churches were rung. Throughout Commonwealth countries, landmarks were illuminated in various colours, mostly blue to signify the birth of a boy. Royal births are greeted with fanfare, pomp and display. Royal births are big political events, where the might and wealth of a ruler is celebrated.

If someone of great importance has been born, the first people a king tells are other people of great importance – other kings, other rulers, nobles, dukes, princes, judges, barons, lords. He sends them special personalised announcements, and they, in turn, send royal gifts, and best wishes. They attend special parties he holds to celebrate the birth of his son, and everyone glories in the pomp and splendour of being among the royal, rich and gifted of the world.

So, if someone with no knowledge of God or the Bible were to write a fictional story about the announcement of the birth of God's Son, taking into consideration what you've just heard about royal births, how would they write it? All the fiction writer knows is earthly kings, and how they announce the birth of their sons.

The Messiah's is the most important birth ever. This is the Son of the High King. He will be the King of the kings. He will rule not a locality, a region, or a city. He will rule the whole earth. Now, this eternal, everlasting God the Son, has mysteriously added to Himself a true human nature, and has been born as a baby.

Consider also how highly anticipated this birth is. God has been preparing Israel for centuries for the coming of Messiah. He has told them the place of his birth in Micah – Bethlehem. He has told them of the nature of His birth in Isaiah – a virgin birth. He has told them the timing of His birth in both Genesis and Daniel – once the sceptre had departed from Judah, and 476 years after the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

People like Simeon and Anna show how highly anticipated this birth is. And with such a momentous birth, you can be sure that when it happens, the people who hear the

announcement are specifically chosen. They are not accidental bystanders that the angelic heralds simply happen upon, or the first people they bump into.

To whom does God send His own angels to sing and announce the birth of the King of Kings? He can send an angelic host to anyone, anywhere. The palace in Jerusalem is just as accessible to them as any other place on Earth. Space or distance isn't a problem. So as the angels speed through millions of galaxies, making their way to that little blue orb called Earth, where are they headed? And to speak to whom?

The chief priests of Israel? The Sanhedrin? The nobility in Jerusalem? The rich in Galilee? The royal house of King Herod? I think if we had written the story, we should say that the experts, the religious professors, the doctors ought to be told. After a royal birth in royal surroundings, we would call on the intellectual elite to come and ratify the birth, agree that it lines up with the prophecies, sign the birth certificate, and stamp, "Messiah" on it.

We would have the Sanhedrin gather, call a conference, have some speeches, write some tractates on the matter, and get the written approval of the experts and of the day. After all, they are the ones who count. They are wise. When they speak, people listen.

As it turns out, King Herod did find out – but the way he found out was a rebuke to his pride. He heard some time after the birth, second-hand, from some Gentile princes who'd travelled for months after reading a publicly visible sign in the Heavens. Those wise men took the effort and time to find the Jewish king born under Herod's nose. But who hears first, and who hears it directly from God's messengers?

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.

Luke 2:8-9

The unexpected answer to who heard first is: shepherds. We don't even know their names. Just a few shepherds keeping night watch over their flocks in the pastures near Bethlehem. And what social status did shepherds occupy in Israel?

Shepherding was considered menial work for the uneducated – and one can understand why. You literally live with animals for days, weeks on end. Not much place to wash yourself. Day after day in the baking sun, sleeping on the hard ground. Shepherds no doubt looked like people who are in the sun all day, who sleep on the ground, and don't get to shave often.

In our culture, there are certain jobs we don't aspire for our children to have, and I sincerely doubt parents in Israel wanted their children to be shepherds. When they were, it was often because they were the youngest. Remember David? Remember how his older brother taunted him about being a shepherd when he came to see the battle: "*Why did you come down here? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness?*" (**1 Samuel 17:28**).

Why would God announce the most important birth of all time to an anonymous group of illiterate shepherds on an obscure hillside in Judea? If Messiah were to be born in our era today, it would be like appearing to some street sweepers or pavement vendors, some people collecting rubbish to recycle. Why would God choose the shepherds to tell first the news of the highest birth?

I think sometimes we hear the Christmas story again and again, and we miss important details. Perhaps we begin to think that somehow the angels were circling over the stable where Jesus was born, and then began travelling from there, and then happened upon these men on the hillsides near Bethlehem.

No, it is not as if the angels were running on foot from Bethlehem and then simply ran into the shepherds. These men were selected. They were chosen. God had decided thousands of years in advance who would be the very first human beings to hear the royal birth announcement, and it was some anonymous shepherds. But why?

1. By announcing the birth to shepherds first, God was explaining the identity of His Son

We have to go back in time here to see God's love for the shepherd. The first son of Adam and Eve, the one who had faith and pleased God, what was he? He was a shepherd. When God selected a nation to be His people and a light to all other people, He chooses Jacob, whom He renames Israel, and what was Israel? He was a shepherd.

When the twelve sons of Israel come down to Egypt, Joseph tells them to say they're shepherds because shepherds were an abomination to the proud Egyptians, which would make sure Israel was given the land of Goshen, separate from the Egyptians. When God wants Israel to be led by a king after his own heart, who does He choose? He picks a shepherd-boy, David, to be the Shepherd-King, and promises that Messiah will come from his house.

When the New Testament church is set up, what does he designate its leaders to be called? Kings? Barons? Lords? Dukes? No, he calls them pastors – shepherds – and tells them to feed His sheep, and shepherd the flock willingly and tenderly. But it goes further than God choosing and using shepherds. As we read Scripture, God begins to call Himself a shepherd:

- **Psalm 23:1-5:** *"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."*
- **Psalm 80:1:** *"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock; You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth!"*
- **Isaiah 40:11:** *"He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young."*
- **Ezekiel 34:11-12:** *"For thus says the Lord GOD: 'Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out.' As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep,*

so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day."

- **Ezekiel 34:31:** *"You are My flock, the flock of My pasture; you are men, and I am your God," says the Lord GOD."*

And we know that when Jesus comes, He identifies Himself in the same way: *"I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep... I am the Good Shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep"* (**John 10:11,14-15**).

Why does God announce the birth to shepherds first? Because a shepherd has been born. Not just one more shepherd, but the Good Shepherd of **John 10**. The Great Shepherd of **Hebrews 13**. The Chief Shepherd of **1 Peter 5**.

Why do you think God loves this shepherding metaphor so much? Because it is one of the best ways of illustrating how He is towards us, Who He is and who we are. Remember, God is not like human teachers, who have to look into the created order to find an illustration. God creates from scratch the things that will be illustrations.

God thinks of sheep and shepherds before the foundation of the Earth, because He knows this will be an ideal way to illustrate who He is. This is why Shepherds hear the announcement first. The Son born in Bethlehem is a shepherd. So here is a shepherd, a human being, who chooses to spend his time among the sheep. He lives with them. He feeds them. He names them, cleans them of their parasites, and binds up broken limbs.

It's an uneven relationship. Sheep are not worth more than humans, but shepherds will lay down their own lives for the sheep. They will risk their own human life against wild animals to protect these simple, dumb animals. Sheep – not fast enough to be raced, not strong enough to be ridden or used to pull ploughs. Not aggressive enough to be protectors.

In addition, sheep are rather unintelligent animals – unable to properly protect themselves, creatures that Darwinistic evolution should have killed off long ago, if natural selection really was a purely undirected, impersonal force in the universe. Sheep that follow the wrong thing. A few years ago, this appeared in the news:

"Hundreds of sheep followed their leader off a cliff in eastern Turkey, plunging to their deaths this week while shepherds looked on in dismay. Four hundred sheep fell 15 metres to their deaths in a ravine in Van province near Iran, but broke the fall of another 1100 animals who survived, newspaper reports said yesterday. Shepherds from Ikizler village neglected the flock while eating breakfast, leaving the sheep to roam free, the Radikal daily said. The loss to local farmers was estimated at \$74,000."

Sheep are made to have human shepherds. Shepherds who protect them, lead them, take them to green pastures and good waters. Shepherds that fight off predators. And that illustration perfectly pictures God and man.

Here is God – the infinite, transcendent, self-sufficient God, perfect in beauty, joy and pleasure. He makes these humans, who are of infinitely less worth than Him, like sheep are to us. Humans who are needy, weak, and prone to self-destruction. The prophet Isaiah was careful to choose the metaphor when he wrote: *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6).*

In fact, so committed is He to shepherding the flock, that He added to Himself the nature of a human being, the very ones he was shepherding. So committed is He to shepherding the flock, that like human shepherds will risk their lives for animals, so God the Son was willing to lay down His life – worth an infinite number of human lives – in order to save some.

To do so, He had to not only be the Shepherd who seeks, but the Lamb who dies. That's why Jesus says, 'I lay down My life for the sheep. I am both a shepherd who dies to protect the sheep, and I am also the ultimate Lamb, given to pay for the sins of the world.' Yet, He wants to dwell with us. God has always been a shepherd at heart. He loves. He feels pity. He protects. He provides. He leads.

So when God first announces the birth of His Son to shepherds, He is saying loud and clear, 'I am a Shepherd, and my Son comes to you as a Shepherd.' God did not announce the birth of His Son to kings, because He didn't come the first time as a King.

God did not announce His birth first of all to sages or generals or aristocrats. He came the first time as a Shepherd, seeking a flock. The message is clear: 'My Son comes to live among you, to feed you, to protect you, to save you. He will lay down His life for you.' But there is a second reason why shepherds are told first.

2. By announcing the birth to shepherds first, God was showing the world who His Son came for

Someone has said that the first coming of Christ is rather like God tiptoeing into the world. He comes through a poor peasant girl, born in an animal barn, told only to a few animal herders. And like we have said, this is no accident. Because not only is God telling the world that His Son is a Shepherd, but He is also telling the world who His Son's flock will be.

These shepherds are simple men. The brightest students in the synagogue probably wouldn't be sent to the hillsides to look after the animals. So God announces this news to the people most humble in terms of social standing – shepherds. Simple, illiterate shepherds. Because do you know what untaught, unlearned shepherds will do with a message that the Messiah has been born in Bethlehem? They will believe it. They will humbly accept it. They will tell others.

Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. "And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marvelled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

Luke 2:10-20

What is God saying through telling shepherds first? Not only is His Son a Shepherd, but His Son's message is for those who are shepherd-like and sheep-like in heart. His Son is going to call. He is not going to intimidate, bully, or drive. He is not going to commandeer, manipulate or threaten. He is going to lead from the front, and call people to believe in Him and follow Him. Like this quiet invitation to simple people, so Jesus is going to gently call to all.

But who will hear His call?

- **Luke 10:21:** *"In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, 'I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight.'"*
- **1 Corinthians 1:27-29:** *"But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence."*

The gospel is for the childlike of heart. It is for the shepherd-like in heart. And so at the very beginning of Messiah's earthly life, God makes it clear: My Son has come to seek and to save those who are lost. If you want to direct your own life, then my Son has not come for you. If you are wiser than Me, then my Son has nothing to teach you.

If you are powerful and strong in your own right, then my Son has nothing you will want. But if you want to be led, if you want to be directed away from your tendency to self-destruction, if you will trust Me, if you will simply, humbly, believe, then you will hear His voice. This Jesus says in **John 10:27**, *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me."*

The gospel is for those who are weak and heavy laden. It is for those who have sinned. It is for those who carry a burden of guilt. It is for those who know they need help, and more than help, they need saving. *"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance"* (**Luke 5:32**).

So when God bypasses the powerful, the learned, the scholars, philosophers, politicians and clergy, and sends His own angels to announce to shepherds, He is making a very powerful statement. 'I do not play the world's game of pomp, splendour and impressing each other with

gold, silver and special titles. I want to save mankind, and I intend my message to be heard by all, understood by all, and believed with the kind of simplicity that the shepherds had.'

God announced the arrival of His Son to shepherds to say to the world, 'You do not need royal birth or riches or high pedigree to become part of My flock. Be simple. Be humble. Come to Me and receive My Son as your forgiveness of sins, as your own Shepherd of your life.' God says to the world, 'I am seeking you out. I am looking for the lost. I don't want you to walk off the cliff of hell' – *"for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost"* (**Luke 19:10**).

Sometimes people ask, if Jesus is really the only way, then why didn't God write the Gospel in the sky, announce it with an angel voice to the whole world? Why did God tiptoe into the world? The answer is, those kinds of announcements appeal to the wrong things in man. They say to the powerful, the proud, the wise in their own eyes, the self-directed, 'Come and add more power, more status, more to your life.'

But God is seeking people who have gone astray, He is not seeking to join them in their waywardness. So He extends a quiet, simple, humble call: 'Come to me, all ye who are weak and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Come, you, who by grace realise that you are sheep, needing direction, needing forgiveness, needing the care of God Himself.' Like a whistle which only dogs can hear, so a humble call can only be heard by those who choose to humble themselves.

To Him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear His voice; and He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. And when He brings out His own sheep, He goes before them; and the sheep follow Him, for they know His voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from Him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.

John 10:3-5

Christ's second coming will not be so. His second coming will not be in a stable in a rural town, with shepherds the first ones to know. No, that was His first coming, because He came as the Shepherd-Lamb. When He comes again, He comes as the Judge and King. Oh, He will still ever be the Good and Great and Chief Shepherd, but He returns with the glory and power which the wise of this world were expecting the first time. And when He comes as Judge, it will be too late to receive Him as Shepherd.

God is the ultimate Artist, and nothing He does on His canvas is wasted. When He painted the story of His Son's birth, He added this detail to cleverly and beautifully say two things to the world: My Son is a Shepherd, first of all – meek, sacrificial, loving, compassionate. Second, My Son has come looking for the lost – not the proud who think they're found, not the proud who think they're righteous, not the proud who don't want a leader. He comes to seek out simple, sheep-like ones. His message will be heard and understood by shepherd-like people.

Have you heard His call today? Have you asked Him to be both your Lamb, and your Shepherd – the sacrifice for your sins, and your Lord?