

There are some songs you can remember singing almost your whole life, and this is one of them for me. “Go Tell It on the Mountain” was part of life in a Lutheran church with a Lutheran school, so much so that I’m sure we sang it at both the day school and Sunday School Christmas programs. Two separate events. “Go Tell It on the Mountain” was there at both, and really, how could it not be?

The not-so-secret success of this Christmas spiritual is that it is just fun to sing. The refrain bounces along and is easy to remember—perfect for children, in that regard—and each stanza ends with this wonderful octave jump, which, if you were as goofy as I was back in grade school, you loved to slide that note all the way up, and then burst out with the refrain.

“Go Tell it on the Mountain/over the hills and everywhere/Go Tell It on the Mountain/that Jesus Christ is born!”

What we have in this song is a perfect marriage of text and tune, that leads singers and listeners to the inescapable conclusion that Christmas is a celebration. If you’re singing this hymn with a frown on your face, you’re doing it wrong. The birth of Jesus is good news of great joy! And built into this hymn is the simple fact that good news does not sit still. It cannot. It must move and find expression.

You know this, especially if you’ve ever received really good news, and had a hard time finding someone to share it with. You got engaged...or you received a promotion...you were accepted into college...or anything that is great news to you...but you can’t seem to get anyone on the phone. No one is replying to your text. It’s frustrating, because good news was meant to be shared! If the news is good enough, no one is going to have to tell you to go share it; you just will. You will not be able to contain yourself. That is what a unique, select group of people found out the night that Jesus was born, and we are introduced to them in stanza one:

“While shepherds kept their watching/O’er silent flocks by night/Behold throughout the heavens/there shone a holy light.”

It really is hard to overstate the importance of shepherds within the Biblical narrative. Shepherding was one of the oldest vocations among the ancient Hebrews. The Bible is filled with references to them. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David were all shepherds at some time in their lives. The 23rd Psalm stands as one of the most well-known passages of Holy Scripture and it features the image of God as shepherd.

In practice, however, shepherding was ordinary. It was necessary and important work. By today’s standards, it would be considered a “blue collar” job, demanding in more ways than one. In his book, “The First Christmas,” Paul Maier writes that “herdsmen had to protect their sheep from ravaging animals and robbers by skillful use of staff...[and] were expected to shear the wool, aid in lambing, and see that their flocks had enough to eat and drink.”

It was to shepherds like these, average working men, pulling a night shift, that the news of the newborn King was entrusted. Think about that. The angels did not appear to the priests in the temple; or the scholars in the synagogues; nor did they trumpet the birth announcement before political rulers of the day. It was to shepherds out in the fields that the good news of great joy was delivered.

Doctor Maier again writes, “Perhaps it was fortunate that they were common laymen, for had they been scholars or theologians, they would have likely held a debate on the hillside instead of rushing into Bethlehem...” It’s a lighthearted comment, but there’s a lot of truth to it, as well. The deliberate choice of these hardworking men says a quite a bit about how God works.

Stanza Two: “The shepherds feared and trembled/when lo, above the earth/ Rang out the angel chorus/that hailed our Savior’s birth.”

The shepherds did not need to be priests, scholars, or theologians to react appropriately to a sky full of angels. They did what any of us would. They feared and trembled. When the radiance of God’s glory showed up, they were shaken to the core. This goes beyond just being startled and points to a spiritual reality.

Two other Biblical examples help illustrate: One is Isaiah, the prophet. Upon having a vision of the Lord in the temple along with angels flying and calling out praises to God, Isaiah “feared and trembled,” saying, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” The second example is Peter. When it seems clear that Jesus is placing a claim on Peter’s life and calling him into discipleship, Peter “Feared and Trembled,” saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

When God (or his ambassadors) show up, people fear and tremble, because the holiness of God is obvious, which makes our unholiness disturbingly obvious also. And these two—holiness and unholiness—cannot stay together unless God does something about it.

In the case of the shepherds, all is made well with a word. The angel says, “Don’t be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David. And this is how you will recognize him: You will find a baby lying in a manger, wrapped in strips of cloth.” And suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others, the armies of heaven, praising God: “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to all whom God favors.”

Listen: along with the shepherds, you do not need to fear holiness, or wrath, or punishment. The radiance of God’s glory has shown up not to destroy you but to save you. Make no mistake, there is wrath and punishment for your sin, but you do not have to bear it. The one who will bear it for you is born in Bethlehem. This is news that changes everything.

It changed everything for these shepherds. It made them do something unthinkable. They left their flocks. They had to know if it was true. And it was, it was all just as the angel had said. The baby, the strips of cloth, the manger, all true. This made them do something else unthinkable. They, themselves, became messengers. The shepherds told everyone what had

happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished. Now, I said before that if the news is good enough, no one is going to have to tell you to tell other people about it, you just will. You won't be able to contain yourself. That's what happened to the herdsmen of Luke chapter 2. Has the good news of a Savior grabbed hold of you in the same way?

The third stanza says, "Down in a lowly manger/the humble Christ was born/And God sent us salvation/that blessed Christmas morn."

Last week as we encountered "Once in Royal David's City," we heard the phrase "With the poor and mean and lowly/lived on earth our Savior holy." That has echoes here: "Down in a lowly manger the humble Christ was born." The humility, the lowliness, the "down-in-ness" of the Christ's entry into the world is captivating, in part because all of these things that look like losing create the ultimate win. "God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn."

This is life-changing good news, but only if you understand what is this "salvation" that was sent on Christmas morn. Simply put, it is nothing less than being saved from self-destruction and long-term separation from the God who is love. There are so many Biblical ways of describing it. Slavery to sin and death. Spiritual prison. Hell. A way that seems right to man but leads to death. What we call "salvation" consists of being saved from that dark future. Someone steps in and acts heroically to prevent that. This is what Jesus did. The way He did it is a lot like his birth. Down on a lowly cross the humble Christ was slain. For those who trust His sacrifice, no cost for sin remains. God's love for you is so deep and wide that he would subject himself to all of this to save you. That blessed Christmas morn, it starts.

Go tell it on the mountain/over the hills and everywhere/go tell it on the mountain/that Jesus Christ is born!