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What Child Is This?

Billions across the globe celebrated Christmas yesterday, but many are not aware of what the birth of Jesus means in their lives. In worship today we assess the reaction of those who were closest to Jesus' birth. We pray that their response of sharing, pondering, and praising will set the standard for our response to the Savior's birth.

Sermon Luke 2:15-20

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.

Introduction: So the turkey carcass or the ham bone is in the freezer, the leftovers went home with the relatives, and the good dishes are stacked next to the sink—you can't put them in the dishwasher. The candles are burned down and the table cloth needs to be washed and the carpet is covered with pieces of gift wrapping and scotch tape. The charges on the credit cards, the usual January cold, and the ache in your lower back start to become reality. And that's what usually happens on the day after Christmas.

We don't usually go to church on the day after Christmas, either. If Christmas falls on a Monday, we start cleaning the house on Tuesday or maybe we go back to work. But every seven years or so, the day after Christmas falls on a Sunday and we're back in church—well, at least some of us are back in church. So what does the preacher talk about on the day after Christmas when he just talked about Christmas a day or two before? The regular Gospel for the First Sunday after Christmas tells the story of the 12 year old Jesus in the temple. That's an important event and it makes for a good sermon but jumping 12 years in one day seems a little contrived. December 26 is also St. Stephen's Day on the Christian calendar, but I wasn't sure you wanted me to focus on stoning and martyrs.

So we're going back to the Christmas story this morning, the part of it we didn't hear on Christmas Eve. The birth has happened and Mary is with her baby. The angel spoke and the angel choirs sang, and the shepherds are standing with their sheep in the fields. Christmas was past for them. So what happened next? Luke tells us in the Christmas Gospel. The big day is past for us, too. We're tired this morning and we're not so certain about today or tomorrow or the future in general. There's inflation and Covid and politics and aging. We have a lot on our minds. The tree is dark and the carols are quiet.

Christmas Is Past. What Next?

I'm thinking the shepherds just stood there with their mouths open and their eyes wide. If they were shivering, it wasn't just from the cold. Nobody had ever heard or seen what they had just heard and seen. But there was more here than shock and awe. A Savior, the angel said, the town of David, the Messiah, the Lord. They knew the prophecies and the promises. They knew what the angel was talking about. And so, **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. No talking it over. They knew the message came from the Lord. No mention of sheep, either. Did they bring the sheep along? Probably not. Did someone stay behind to watch the flock? Doesn’t seem like it. Did they dawdle or dally? Did they stop to catch their breath? **They hurried off** Luke tells us. **They came with haste** we used to say. They didn’t just go to Jesus; they **pursued** Jesus and, of course, they found him lying in a manger.

Christmas is past. What next? **Pursue** is a good place to start. In the manger we saw the beginning of God’s plan to save us from sin. We saw God’s Son take on human flesh which would eventually lead him to the cross to suffer in our place. But we have heard this so many times. After a while sin doesn’t seem to compare with the other problems we face. We worry about our spouse and family getting sick, about our investments and our future, about expenses more than we can handle, about an ache or a pain we’ve had for too long. Sin isn’t always on our list of big problems. But it is a problem. Sin is like a defective chromosome inside us. But sin is also like a rash that starts in one place and then spreads. It begins to take over and pretty soon it attacks our life with God. Worship becomes a habit, Bible study gives way to brunch, prayers are quiet, guilt grows, heaven becomes uncertain or irrelevant. Bright lights in the sky drove the shepherds to Jesus, but the darkness of sin is what leads us to Jesus. We need to hear his voice; we long to hear his Word. Worship is an every-Sunday delight. Bible study become natural. Prayer is automatic. We **pursue** Jesus because he offers what we need the most: He forgives our sins.

They knew enough to be quiet when they found Mary and Jesus. You don’t raise your voice and scare the baby. But they were bursting inside. The angel’s message, the choir’s song, the sight of Jesus—it just overwhelmed them. **So 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.** They may have whispered their story to Mary and Joseph, and Mary and Joseph may have whispered their story to the shepherds. But the whispers stopped once they hit the streets. Where did they go and whom did they tell? Luke doesn’t tell us but we can imagine. Did they race home and tell the wife and kids? Did they knock on their neighbors’ doors? Did they stop people on the road? I doubt they told the priests or the sheep since neither the priests nor the sheep would have listened or cared. Did they stop proclaiming that night or was this a story they told until the day they died? We don’t know. What we know is that once they saw Jesus they **proclaimed** him.

Christmas is past. What next? **Proclaim** is what we do. The wife has a baby and dad does phone, email, and Instagram. The kid gets accepted at UW-Madison and he instantly texts his friends. The tornado misses your block and you’re on the front lawn thanking God with your neighbors. God comes to earth to change the way we live. He takes away the guilt, he shows us the way, he provides the power, he alters the future—we have to tell that. We have to approach our lazy kids who aren’t coming to church, we have to pray with our loving grandkids who believe whatever we tell them, we have to share with our neighbors who share their fears with us, we have to open our wallets to send missionaries to places as close as West Bend and as far away as Vietnam. The shepherds couldn’t stop themselves; they couldn’t hold their tongues. They couldn’t help but speak what they had seen and heard. And neither can we. We **proclaim** Jesus because he offers what people need the most: He forgives their sins.

Mary must have been exhausted. The trip had been long. 90 miles uphill is a challenge for a strong man; she was a pregnant woman. Finding a place to give birth wasn’t tiring, but it was worrying. We don’t know if her labor was difficult, although mothers will say that labor is always difficult. And then the shepherds showed up and what a story they had to tell. It was over now. When Mary was a girl and thought about being a mother, this wasn’t in her plans. There were no angels in her dreams for the future. Even after nine months it was still unfathomable that this baby was God’s Son. She wasn’t upset; she wasn’t afraid. But she took everything in. **Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.** Quietly, calmly, confidently, Mary **pondered** Jesus.

Christmas is past. What next? We must **ponder**, too. We have to think about this. Easier said than done, right? Your lives are jam-packed with distractions: family, work, money, deadlines. Who has time to contemplate? Young folks think that people retire to have more time. But we retired folks hear just as many distracting voices, just different voices. We all struggle to stop and think. But we must do this. Do it over coffee in the morning; think about what it means to be forgiven. Go off by yourself at break and remember what it means to be a child of God. Put your phone down and put

your computer on sleep mode and consider that Jesus never leaves you. Think about Christmas and think about Good Friday and Easter, too. Quietly, calmly, confidently. **Ponder** Jesus because he offers us what we need the most: He forgives our sins, he empowers our lives, he guides us to glory.

Eventually the shepherds had to get back to their sheep. What a night! The promises they memorized as children and the hopes they had as adults—all fulfilled at Christmas. And so **the shepherds returned, glorifying, and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.** So what did they do? Did they sing, did they dance, did they shout: Praise the Lord, praise the Lord? Maybe, but the sheep needed care; they needed grass and water and protection. The shepherds had a job to do and they did it. But once the angels were gone and once the baby was seen, their lives were filled with the kind of **praise** God loves. They praised God as they **pursued** Jesus and the truths he taught. They **proclaimed** Jesus to new friends and even enemies. In their own way they **pondered** Jesus and what he meant in their lives. Their pursuing and proclaiming and pondering—this was their highest praise.

Christmas is past. What next? We need to **praise** God, too. But God isn't looking for choir members or praise choruses. He's not asking us to shout and jump for joy. God knows we have work to do and lives to live. The holiday is over; we're back to same old, same old again. But God gives us time to praise him and we praise him best when we pursue his Son and the message of his grace; when we proclaim his truth wherever and whenever we can; when we ponder his love in our lives. May the Spirit move us all to look back at Christmas and **pursue, proclaim, ponder, and praise.** That's what comes next when Christmas is past. Amen.