

# Rise up shepherd and follow

## Week 2

*Lisa Scheffler, author*

*The shepherds had an angel,  
The wise men had a star,  
But what have I, a little child,  
To guide me home from far,  
Where glad stars sing together,  
And singing angels are?*

*Lord Jesus is my Guardian,  
So I can nothing lack:  
The lambs lie in His bosom  
Along life's dangerous track:  
The wilful lambs that go astray  
He bleeding fetches back...*

*...Those Shepherds through the lonely night  
Sat watching by their sheep,  
Until they saw the heavenly host  
Who neither tire nor sleep,  
All singing 'Glory, glory'  
In festival they keep.*

*Christ watches me, His little lamb,  
Cares for me day and night,  
That I may be His own in heaven:  
So angels clad in white  
Shall sing their 'Glory, glory,'  
For my sake in the height.  
— Christina Rossetti, from "A Christmas Carol: For My Godchildren"<sup>1</sup>*

Our cities are full of bright and buzzing street lights and 24-hour traffic noise. Those of us who live in a city have to use our imaginations to picture the night Christ was born. Of course, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Christina Georgina Rossetti, *New Poems by Christina Rossetti: Hitherto Unpublished Or Uncollected* (Macmillan and Company, 1896).

shepherds who camped outside of the village of Bethlehem were quite familiar with dark and silent nights. Spending the night in fields illuminated only by the distant sparkle of a million stars, the only sounds the shepherds were used to hearing were the bleating and rustling of the sheep. How astonished they must have been on the night Jesus was born!

Their seemingly ordinary night was joyfully disrupted when a host of angels penetrated the silence and peeled back the darkness. Their glory shining like the sun and their voices raised in exultant proclamation, the angels announced the best possible news for humanity. The Messiah had arrived!

But why shepherds? Of all the people they could have visited on the day Christ was born, why did the angels appear to shepherds? Last week in our Advent study we considered the task of the angels. We traveled along with them as they delivered the amazing news of Christ's birth. This week, we'll spend the night with the shepherds. We'll ponder why they were chosen, examine what they were told and reflect on how they responded. Modern city dwellers can learn a lot from a first century group of shepherds.

## Advent Guide

At the end of Day 5 you'll find an advent guide that you can use to celebrate Christmas with your family or friends. The third Sunday of Advent is this week, but it's not too late to join the rest of us in observing Advent!

# Day 1 | From one shepherd to another

The image of the good shepherd is prominent in the Bible. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that the God who repeatedly describes himself as the shepherd and his people as his flock would choose a group of shepherds to welcome his Son into the world.

In the poem above, Christina Rossetti makes a connection between the shepherds watching over their sheep and Christ watching over her, "his little lamb." The angels who rejoice in the birth of the Savior also rejoice when a lost sheep is saved.

For the rest of week, we'll focus on the Bible's account of the shepherds receiving the news of the Jesus' arrival, but for today, let's take a moment to reflect on what it means that God is our shepherd. During a time of year when it's easy to get distracted by both the joys and the stresses of Christmas, take time to worship the good shepherd who watches over you, his little lamb.

Pastor David Murray relates some lessons he's learned from living in the Scottish Highlands surrounded by sheep.<sup>2</sup> He notes that sheep are excessively foolish, frustratingly stubborn, and dangerously fond of straying. "A sheep may get caught in barbed wire trying to break through a fence. And the next day it will try it again, and again...So many times I was out in the middle of nowhere when I would come across a sheep – miles from anyone and anything – and totally unconcerned. I would look up on a cliff and there was a sheep out on a lethal ledge." His

---

<sup>2</sup> David Murray, "Sheep: *'This Time It's Personal'*," HeadHeartHand Blog (blog), January 5, 2011, <http://headhearthand.org/blog/2011/01/05/sheep-this-time-its-personal/>.

conclusion: sheep are completely dependent on their shepherd and will die without him. Furthermore, all of us resemble sheep more than we'd like to admit. It's a good thing that you and I have a Shepherd who loves us so very, very much.

Reflect on the following verses and consider how we are all prone to act like sheep. Also notice how God treats his sheep — with love, care and compassion. Then praise God for being your good shepherd.

## **Isaiah 53:6**

*<sup>6</sup> We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.*

## **Psalm 23:1–4**

*<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
<sup>3</sup> he refreshes my soul.  
He guides me along the right paths  
for his name's sake.  
<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk  
through the darkest valley,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.*

## **Isaiah 40:11**

*<sup>11</sup> He tends his flock like a shepherd:  
He gathers the lambs in his arms  
and carries them close to his heart;  
he gently leads those that have young.*

## **Matthew 18:12–14**

*<sup>12</sup> "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? <sup>13</sup> And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. <sup>14</sup> In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.*

The good Shepherd loves you. The eternal Son entered time and space as a human being to gather his flock so he can bring them home!

*Reflect on the loving care your Shepherd shows you. What do these passages tell you about how Jesus feels about his sheep?*

*Praise him for it and ask him how you should approach the celebration of his birth. How should his love and guidance affect the choices you make during the Christmas season? How should it affect the way you treat your fellow sheep? What about the ones who are still lost? Take time in prayer to consider these questions today.*

## Day 2 | An unlikely audience

Yesterday we considered our relationship with the good Shepherd. Today let's return to a hillside outside the small town of Bethlehem and sit with a group of unsuspecting shepherds who were about to have the experience of a lifetime.

### **Luke 2:8–10**

*<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."*

The guests who were invited to celebrate at the world's most remarkable birthday celebration would not have been welcomed to dine in many homes. Among the Jewish people, shepherds were looked down on, and not just because they did hard, dirty, back-breaking labor that left them smelling like the sheep. The nature of their work did not allow them to keep the ceremonial law. Even more problematic was their reputation for being dishonest. According to rabbinical teaching, shepherds were not to be allowed to testify in law-courts because, as a class, they were considered unreliable.<sup>3</sup> Yet, God sent angels to a group of Shepherds to announce Christ's birth.

God did not dispatch the angels to the kings of the earth because power and wealth don't make one worthy. He didn't send them to the most strategic military generals or the wisest sages because not even they could have anticipated God's extraordinary plan to save humanity. God chose those who, like himself, knew what it was to care for creatures who were stubborn and feckless and prone to wander into danger. He chose those who had probably spent many long nights searching for the lost ones and calling them home. God sent his angels to announce the birth of Jesus to a group of shepherds, not because they were worthy, but because his grace extends to all people, even those rejected by society.

Much of what our culture values and exalts — money, celebrity, beauty, status, ambition, success — is of little importance in the Kingdom of God. According to the Messiah, it's the poor in spirit who inherit the kingdom, the meek who inherit the earth, and the pure who see God (Matthew

---

<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 101.

5).

In a sermon preached over 1600 years ago, Augustine of Hippo elegantly depicts the beautiful paradoxes we celebrate at Christmas:

*Man's Maker was made man,  
that He, Ruler of the stars,  
might nurse at His mother's breasts;*

*that the Bread might be hungry,  
the Fountain thirst,  
the Light sleep,  
the Way be tired from the journey;*

*that the Truth might be accused by false witnesses,  
the Judge of the living and the dead be judged by a mortal judge,  
Justice be sentenced by the unjust,*

*the Teacher be beaten with whips,  
the Vine be crowned with thorns,  
the Foundation be suspended on wood;*

*that Strength might be made weak,  
that He who makes well might be wounded,  
that Life might die.*

*He was made man to suffer these and similar undeserved things for us,  
that He might free us who were undeserving;  
and He who on account of us endured such great evils, merited no evil,  
while we who through Him were so bountifully blessed,  
had no merits to show for such blessings.<sup>4</sup>*

Who could have anticipated the lengths to which God would go to redeem us? It's astounding! Like those shepherds in the field, there is nothing that makes us intrinsically worthy to receive such kindness. We are loved by God because he chooses to love us. By the Spirit's power, we should love others the same way — unselfishly and without prejudice. May those startled shepherds remind us of the grace we've been shown, and may we show that grace to others.

*Look back at Augustine's description of Jesus. Which one is the most meaningful to you this Christmas. Pray over your answer and ask God to meet your needs. He loves you so!*

## Day 3| Good news and great joy!

The child who was born in a Bethlehem manger to a carpenter and his bride was an unlikely

---

<sup>4</sup> Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, translated by Thomas Comerford Lawler, *Sermons for Christmas and Epiphany* (Westminster, Md. : Newman Press, 1952), <http://trove.nla.gov.au/version/26483341>.

candidate for the title of Messiah. He was not born in a palace, but in a stable. His birth was not witnessed by royalty, but by shepherds. Yet, he was the one God had promised. He would not kick the Romans out of Israel, but he would do something far more significant by defeating sin and death. In the message that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds is the kernel of a thoroughly radical idea. The Messiah came to rescue not just one nation, but anyone who put their faith in him.

## Luke 2:11–15

*<sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*

*<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,*

*<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

*<sup>15</sup> 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.”*

The angel’s message is unbelievable good news! Pay special attention to the way Jesus is described by the angels in verse 11. He is the **Savior**, the one who will rescue humanity from sin and death. He is the **Messiah**, the one who will bring righteousness, justice and peace. He is the **Lord**, the rightful authority who reigns over the whole human race. Jesus is Deliverer, Master and King.

In his earthly ministry Jesus would demonstrate his power over evil spirits, sin, and disease. He would cast out demons, forgive sins, and heal the sick. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet speaks of the anointed one who would come to “bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners” (Isaiah 61:1). Jesus would claim this prophecy for himself at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:16–20).

The angels also promise peace. Peace begins with our relationship to our Creator. When rebels become beloved children and our sins are forgiven, peace with God is a reality. On the cross, Jesus took the punishment for humanity’s rebellion and every sin was laid upon him so that a just God could adopt sinful people. It is in his presence that we find peace, wholeness and contentment.

From that starting point, the gospel becomes the path to peace in our human relationships. It teaches us how to forgive like Jesus does and be reconciled with one another. Because we have received an unending supply of grace through Christ, we can extend grace — even to our enemies. We can be quick to admit we’re wrong and ask for forgiveness. We can offer forgiveness to those who wrong us. The gospel teaches us that love covers a multitude of sins and to trust in the God of justice who will right every wrong.

Family situations can be complicated. Long-held grudges and resentments can bubble to the surface during the holidays. Pray for peace in your relationships this Christmas, and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in what steps you might need to take.

If we want to see more peace in our lives and in the lives of those around us, we need to live out the gospel and share it with others. With every person who receives the Spirit, the Kingdom of God expands. We need to proclaim the good news that the shepherds heard at Christmas, so that others can know the amazing miracle God did one night in Bethlehem.

*Are you in need of peace this Christmas? Peace with God? Peace in your spirit? Confess your sins and express that need to God in prayer.*

*Are you desiring peace with another person? Pray about opportunities to make peace with others during the Christmas season. Could this Christmas be the time when you seek forgiveness? Or maybe a time you could offer it?*

## Day 4 | Spreading the news

Answering the call of the angels, the shepherds rush off to find the Messiah. Imagine them huddled together around the manger — the craggy, weather-worn faces smiling down on the perfect Son of God. What must Mary have thought during these moments as she looked at her tiny, helpless son who would one day save the world?

### **Luke 2:16–20**

*<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*

Here's the thing about news; it is meant to be shared. The birth of Christ, the momentous occasion that marked a new era in human history, could not go unannounced. God sent his angels to proclaim what he was doing. The appearance of the angels and the sight of Jesus amazed the shepherds so much that they immediately began to spread the news. Jesus — Savior, Lord and Messiah — was here! Now, nearly 2000 years later, it's our turn to spread the news.

Christmas is a time of year when people might be open to hearing more about Jesus, or accept an invitation to come to church or watch a service online. But if we're too busy with our own plans, we'll miss opportunities to reach out to those who might know about the baby in the manger, but have never met the Savior and Lord.

As Christians, we know that the material excesses of this season won't bring people lasting joy. Even the best gifts can leave us feeling hollow. People need to know that Jesus can bring true satisfaction in a world filled with empty promises. If we allow the Spirit to guide us, we can show people that the joy of Christmas is found in Christ.

We also know that Christmas is a time when many people feel sad, depressed, and alone. Anxiety is running high this year because of the pandemic and people can be brittle and easy to offend. Addictions can often get worse during the holidays as people become more desperate for distraction and relief, even if it's temporary. People's loneliness can feel more acute during the time of year that's supposed to be filled with family, friends, and fun. Financial difficulties can be even more troublesome during the season when we're called to spend and spend.

We need to keep our eyes and ears open for those who might be hurting. We should pay special attention to family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers and offer help and compassion when we can. What better way to share the gospel than to tangibly demonstrate the love of Christ during this time of the year. What better way to honor his arrival?

Christmas is our time to be like the angels, excitedly proclaiming the good news of great joy to all people. It's our time to be like the shepherds, joyfully seeking and worshiping the Lord and then spreading the news of his arrival. Take some time to think about how you might share the good news this Christmas and pray that God will give you the opportunities.

*Are there people in your life who are coming to mind as you read this? People you know who might be hurting? Practically speaking, what can you do to share the love of Christ with them Christmas? You can start by praying for them now.*

## Day 5 | Reflect, Connect, Respond

This week we followed the shepherds from the fields to the manger and out into the world to share what the good news of Jesus' birth. We've also considered how God is our good Shepherd. What is your biggest takeaway from this week? Spend some time praying and reflecting on what the Lord has shown you.

### Reflect

Look back at the passages we covered this week.

[Isaiah 53:6](#)

[Psalm 23:1-4](#)

[Isaiah 40:11](#)

[Matthew 18:12-14](#)

[Luke 2:8-20](#)

*What has God shown you from the shepherds' journey? What does it mean to you that the Lord is your Good Shepherd?*

### Connect

For slaves living in the American south, spirituals were sacred songs that provided a way of expressing and sharing their faith. A well-known African-American spiritual relates to the

passage we looked at this week: “Rise Up, Shepherd and Follow”

*There's a star in the east on Christmas morn.  
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.  
It will lead to the place where the Christ was born.  
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.*

*Follow, follow;  
rise up, shepherd, and follow.  
Follow the star of Bethlehem.  
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.*

In many parts of the Antebellum South, it was against the law for an enslaved person to read, so songs and stories were some of the only ways they could communicate the message of Christmas. In this song, the story of the wise men is combined with that of the shepherds. In this song, it's the shepherds who follow the star to find Jesus.

In their Advent study, *Mary Had a Baby*, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marilyn Thornton explain that the role of the shepherd was certainly relatable to enslaved Africans.<sup>5</sup> They could identify with those who performed back-breaking labor and existed on the bottom rung of society's hierarchy. But in this African-American spiritual, the shepherd rises up and follows the star, just like the Kings from the east. In singing this song, the enslaved people were invited to identify with royalty. In God's eyes, if not society's, they were worthy to follow the star and worship the newborn King. Like the shepherds, they were chosen ahead of the wealthy and powerful to meet the Son of God. Like the Magi, they were wise and bold enough to follow the star.

Because of Jesus' messages that showed God's love and promoted human dignity and worth for all humanity, many slaveholders were worried about the spread of Christianity among their slaves. And some spirituals, like this one, not only gave a reason to seek freedom, but helped slaves escape captivity. Escape routes to the north were sometimes communicated in song and then navigated using the stars.

Generations of people from all walks of life have celebrated the Christmas story and found hope in the baby in the manger. The birth of the Savior, Messiah, and King has been a life-giving announcement to people who have little hope of earthly salvation or justice. To know that Jesus experienced poverty, injustice, cruelty, and oppression makes him a Lord who identifies with the oppressed and the outcast, and one who will vindicate and exalt them in the end.

Perhaps slavery and oppression are not a very “Christmas-y” thing to talk about, but they are closer to the reality of the first Christmas than shiny tinsel and beautifully wrapped presents. Those of us who get to celebrate the bounty of God this holiday season, should not forget those in our past and in our midst who are having a very different experience. God gives grace to the humble and so should we.

---

<sup>5</sup> Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marilyn Thornton, *Mary Had a Baby: As Advent Bible Study Based on African American Spirituals*, (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 2014) p.15-17.

# Respond

## What is your next step?

How is the Holy Spirit leading you to respond to God's Word? How are you taking advantage of the Christmas season to grow in your relationship with God? How are you keeping Jesus at the center of the season?

How are you reaching out to others this season? Those who are hurting? Those in need? Pray about ways you can share Christ's love.

Are you keeping Advent this season? If you haven't already started, go ahead and join us this week. You'll find an Advent guide on the next page.

# Advent Guide

The word “advent” comes from the Latin word that means “coming.” Advent is a time of expectant waiting as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus and look forward to his return.

Traditionally, advent is celebrated on the four Sundays before Christmas and on Christmas Eve. Some Christians use an Advent wreath or “crown” that sits on a table. Four candles are placed around the wreath, and one is added in the center. A different candle is lit each week, and the center candle is lit on Christmas Eve. During this special time, Scriptures are read and hymns are sung in celebration of Jesus’ arrival!

## 2020 Advent Calendar

To follow this Advent calendar, you’ll need: a wreath or “crown” of some kind where you can safely place the candles, five candles (a gold, white, green, purple and red), and a Bible. You’ll also want to find versions of the hymns listed below so you can sing along.

Adapt this so that it fits your family. Use a children’s Bible with pictures if you have little ones. If you don’t have an official Advent wreath or the right color candles, just use what you do have. Be creative! The point is to gather around the table with others and remember what’s truly special about this time of year — the arrival of Jesus, our Savior and Lord.

### Week 1 (11/29) The Prophets

- Gold Candle: for prophets who announced Christ’s coming
- Scripture Readings: Isaiah 9:2–7, Isaiah 53:1–5, Micah 5:2, Luke 2:25–38 (Simeon and Anna)
- Hymn: *O Come O Come Emmanuel*

### Week 2 (12/6) The Angels

- White Candle: for the angels who announced Jesus’ coming
- Scripture Readings: Luke 1:11–45 (to Zechariah and Mary), Matthew 1:18–25 (to Joseph)
- Hymn: *Hark the Herald*

### Week 3 (12/13) The Shepherds

- Green Candle: for the shepherds who came to worship Jesus
- Scripture Reading: Luke 2:8–20
- Hymn: *Joy to the World*

### Week 4 (12/20) The Wise Men

- Purple Candle: for the wise men who came to worship Jesus
- Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1-18
- Hymn: *We Three Kings*

## **Christmas Eve (12/24) Jesus!**

- Red Candle: for the coming of Jesus
- Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-7; 40, John 3:16
- Hymns: *Away in a Manger, What Child is This?, Amazing Grace*