

Will you sing the first verse of *Silent Night* with me?

That's the first verse. Peaceful. Quiet. But by the second verse, things have heated up a bit. Shepherds quaking, glories streaming, heavenly hosts singing. And that doesn't even take into account all those angel wings. The story says there were hosts of them. Hoards of wind-producing wings. Add that to shepherds quaking and heavenly hosts singing and animals lowing. Not to mention a woman giving birth and a man trying to keep it together in the middle of all this. Anything but silent!

Maybe that's what God intended. After all, this is the Messiah ... the savior of the universe! The whole story, from beginning to end, is about God's desire to be known and about people wrestling with the plan of God. Luke, chapter one: I hear Zechariah ... father of John the Baptist ... getting into it with the angel Gabriel who visited him to say his wife Elizabeth would be pregnant at the age of sixty with the one who would pronounce the Savior's coming. I assume ... since Gabriel made him mute for nine months ... that Zechariah argued loud enough for it to get on Gabriel's nerves. I hear Elizabeth ... mother of John the Baptist ... crying out for joy as her sense of shame is healed. I hear Mary trying to talk over the noise of angel wings while Gabriel excitedly tells her how God is going to bring the Messiah into the world. Anything but silent! And I assume God has called *us* to be anything but silent in the face of this news, too. If the angels are any indication of the right response to this news about Jesus, then joy is a great response. Praise is appropriate. Anything but silence!

Look with me at Luke, chapter 2. Let's walk through those final days before Christ was born.

(Luke 2:1-3) - *In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3And everyone went to his own town to register.*

The principle here is that God works through circumstances to accomplish his will. We already know from the prophet Micah, in the Old Testament, that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. Micah 5:2 says - *But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.* So the place for Jesus' birth had already been divinely appointed. God just had to get Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem before she gave birth. So he worked through the census ordered by the governor.

For a woman nine months pregnant, this might not have looked like a great idea but God can use anything to accomplish his purposes. Henry Blackaby says, "God uses difficult events, traumatic circumstances, and trying life experiences to lead us to spiritual maturity." God can use anything. Our problem is that we get so tied up in the circumstance that we fail to look for where God might be working. **I wonder how it would change things for you if you began to look for God, rather than focusing on your circumstances.**

Go back to the story in Luke, chapter 2. (Luke 2:4-5) - *Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.* What I learn from Joseph is that connections matter. Joseph was part of a couple (so it was his job to stick by Mary and get her to Bethlehem), part of a tribe (so it was his job to make sure they got counted) ... but most of all he was part of God's plan.

Joseph's spiritual connection to God was critical to accomplishing the will of God. Think about how this story would have changed if Joseph had not been a spiritual man. So that brings us back to the question: **How it would change things for you if you began to orient your life toward God, rather than focusing on your circumstances?**

Luke 2:6-7 - *While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.* I have to tell you ... I feel for Mary at this point. She has just taken a donkey ride across some arid territory ... they've probably gotten off at a couple of exits looking for a hotel ... she's been left waiting in the parking lot while Joseph goes in to see if there's a vacancy ... they've argued over why he didn't call ahead. Then there were the crowds of people to fight through because it's festival time ... and through all of this, Mary is in labor ... and gets just desperate enough to say, "I don't care if it's a cave ... get me off this donkey!" So they find a cave near a field where animals are grazing ... and there, she gives birth to a baby that's been blessed by God.

If Joseph teaches us to look for God rather than focusing on circumstances, Mary teaches us to make the *most* of our circumstances. She reminds us that we don't have to have every "i" dotted and every "t" crossed ... we don't have to be completely in control in order to make an eternal difference. Because ... remember? ... God can use anything to accomplish his purposes. Sometimes, a cave, an animal trough and a piece of cloth are enough.

I know how it is at this time of year. We get overloaded with things to do ... and when we start to feel out of control, we get hyper-focused on trying to control *something*. And that has the effect of us micromanaging everything and everybody. Every detail becomes a life or death

issue. Have you been there? It really comes back to what happens when we focus on our circumstances rather than on God. **How would it change your life if you placed your circumstances, just like they are, in God's hands?** Didn't try to change them ... or change the people around you ... but instead ... allowed God to take what you've got and make the most of it? How would that change things for you?

The shepherds got it. Listen to Luke 2:8-12 - *There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."* These shepherds are amazing. In their society, they were the lowest of the low. Not respected at all, from a human point of view. And yet, they were the ones God first chose to announce the plan to ... because He knew these guys were watching for Him.

These shepherds were pretty impressive, spiritually. First, they had to believe in the actual existence of angels. They had to trust that there is a spiritual world beyond this one. Second, they had to know the scriptures well enough to know God was going to send a messiah into the world. These guys were not even welcome in the synagogue because they were considered ritually unclean, and yet they knew the plan of God! And third, they had to be watching for where God was at work, while their lives went on as usual. **So the spiritual principle I get from the shepherds is this: If you spend all your time focusing on the sheep, you might miss God when He shows up.** In other words, if all our attention is on the people around us ... how to please them, provide for them, placate them ... if all our energy and attention is on our

earthly circumstances and relationships, we may actually miss the more profound movements of the Holy Spirit.

Which is a pretty amazing thought especially for this season of the year. Because we can get very focused on pleasing people ... on making sure we get the right gifts to the right people and go to the right parties ... which gets us focused on our limited time and finances ... which gets us focused on “self” ... and before you know it, we’ve missed where God is at work.

So here’s the real question: **How are you involved in the kingdom of God *beyond* how it affects your personal life?** I’m not talking about praying for parking places or even for God to make you a better Christian. I’m talking about concern for how God is working in the world. How are you watching for Christ’s return? How are you shepherding not just the *people* you’ve been given to take care of, but God’s plan?

After the angels make this glorious proclamation to the shepherds about this plan of God, its like they can’t contain themselves. The sky fills with angels and they burst into song (Luke 2:13-14 - TNIV) - *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."* Can you imagine what that must have been like? To watch the sky fill with multitudes of angels ... all singing praise to God?

My guess is that most of us have a healthy amount of skepticism when it comes to things like angels and heavenly beings. God, we get. We even get some comfort from blaming things on a devil. But really ... in the way we live our lives ... most of us don’t practice a faith that readily accepts the spiritual world as part of our reality. Billy Graham says, “I do not believe in angels

because I have ever seen one, because I haven't. I believe in angels because the Bible says there are angels; and I believe the Bible to be the true Word of God. I also believe in angels because I have sensed their presence in my life on special occasions." Hebrews 1:14 calls them ministering spirits ... spiritual beings able to move between the physical and spiritual world to bring messages, comfort and protection. Jesus was ministered to by angels. Gabriel was sent on several occasions to bring special messages to people from God. Psalm 91 says, "He will give his angels charge over you, to guard you in all your ways." I've learned, just in recent years ... as I've become more aware of the spiritual battle taking place over this world ... to ask for the presence of angels as protection. Just about every Sunday, we pray before the first service, and we ask God to post angels at every door to guard the souls who come here. We do that because we want everything God has for us, and angels are a resource given to us out of God's love and creativity.

Think of them as spiritual friends. The Bible says that the angels rejoice every time a believer is welcomed into the kingdom. They are like our biggest fans. And because they have been in the presence of God, angels know the pure joy of the Lord ... which is something we could all use more of. So Lorrie Myers says, "The message of 'good tidings of great joy' is not for the Christmas season only. Let's tap into that supernatural river of joy! Let's get swallowed up in a spirit of joy. In delighting in the Lord. In rejoicing in His presence. And in bringing His Kingdom of joy down here on earth as it is in heaven." Maybe that's a good prayer for the week ahead: **"Lord, send your angels to teach me how to rejoice in you ... so that the joy of the Lord can be my strength."**

The birth story in Luke ends with the shepherds doing everything we've talked about this morning. Rather than staying stuck in their own circumstances ... focused on the sheep, they

looked for where God was at work so they could join him. Since they were not afraid of spiritual things, they had angels to guide and protect them. Where they saw God at work, they experienced joy, and they spread that joy as they returned to their fields.

So ... let's rehearse the lessons we learned today:

- Instead of complaining about your circumstances, make the most of them.
- Connections matter. If you do not have a spiritual connection with God, stop everything and ask for it.
- Get in the habit of looking for God at work, so you can join him.
- Practice joy ... in every circumstance ... and pray for God to send angels to teach you how to find joy right where you are ... right now.