

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
December 24, 2016

The Way It Was: The Shepherds “The Soul Felt Its Worth”

O holy night!
The stars are brightly shining
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth!
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till he appear'd and **the soul felt its worth.**

The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11).

How much is your soul worth?

1. The soul's worth in the shepherds' eyes

Could you imagine the shepherds talking about the worth of their soul? They probably didn't have a conversation like this, but humor me for a minute.

“Yep! I'm a shepherd. Not everyone can do this kind of work. Lots of people envy me!

“Yep! It's been a good year. My investment in sheep has gone through the roof. I have 200% more sheep than last year.

“And I made a killing in the sheep market. I'm selling these sheep for top dollar. I've got quite a few gold coins hidden away in the folds of these robes.

“In fact, I'm making a sheep dynasty. I have 10 sons and all of them are working with me in the sheep business.”

Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? And yet how many of us establish our value by comparing ourselves with others? As though our job makes us worth more, or that we are successful, or that we have money, or that we have family that we are proud of. Now these may be blessings God gives you. But is that where to find your soul's worth?

The problem is all that value goes away. The Christmas shepherds aren't in the fields tonight. They have been dead so long even their bones are probably dust. No one cares how many sheep they had or how much gold they had in their pockets. If they enjoyed a great family life, who cares? No one I know is saying today, “I'm a great great grandson or granddaughter of those Christmas shepherds.”

All the stuff that we can base our worth on just doesn't last. The shepherds knew that too. That's why, when the angels appeared that night, they were filled with fear. All that they might have based their

self-worth on didn't mean a thing when they saw the glory of the Lord. They saw the truth: Big God, little me.

But the angel announced, "Do not be afraid!" The angels came to announce the worth of their souls and ours.

2. The soul's worth in God's eyes

"I have good news of great joy... Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord."

We spend countless hours choosing Christmas presents for those we love. Why? Because you want to show how precious people are to you.

How precious would you be to someone if he spent an eternity planning your Christmas present? That's what the shepherds heard.

"Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born."

Long ago God had promised through the prophet Micah,

"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" (Micah 5:2).

"From ancient times." The Hebrew is "from days of eternity." Before the world began, God started planning for this gift to the shepherds. Before the world began he was planning this gift of his Son to be the Savior for the shepherds and for you.

Then consider the worth of this Christmas present: "He is Christ the Lord." The child born to be the Savior of the shepherds was the Lord, the God of the universe. Only the death of the God of the universe could pay for your sins and mine. This is the Christmas gift that God gives you tonight so you know your great worth in his eyes.

3. The soul's worth in the angels' eyes

Yes, the shepherds began to understand their soul's worth that night. But what about you? The angels sang for the shepherds. Multitudes of angels! But I'm not hearing any angels this evening. Does your soul and mine have the same great worth as the shepherds?

On this Christmas night I want you to remember that at critical times in your life, the angels are singing for you as well.

In Luke 15, some people, the Pharisees, thought they were worth a lot. They despised the lowly sinners among whom they lived. But Jesus said that there is rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Last Sunday we baptized a little boy named Finneus. After the baptism we all applauded that we had a new little brother in Christ. I'm sure that mom and dad were filled with joy because so many Christians were joining them that day in celebrating the new life of faith in their son.

But it wasn't just the people here applauding. The very angels of God were rejoicing. The angels understood the great worth of Finneus' soul!

The beauty of God's promises is that they are unchanging. Every day you can go back to your baptism and hear the angels celebrating as you admit your sins like you did tonight and claim again the forgiveness that Jesus won for you and that was promised to you in your baptism.

Some of you aren't baptized. Some of the children here today aren't baptized. If that is the case, why not take out the connection card right now and check your interest in scheduling a baptism. Let's sit down and talk so that your soul feels its worth. Let's schedule that day when you not only hear the people of God rejoicing over you, but the angels themselves. We want your soul to feel its worth!

There is another day that we know the angels pay special attention to us. Again in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus told the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus. Lazarus dies. Guess who is there! Angels appear and carry Lazarus to heaven.

At the moment you die, when all the worth that you have accumulated in this world, all the honor that others have given you, all the money and success and power and even the love of family... when all that is beyond your experiencing any more, the angels of God are there to celebrate and to take you to the Father's throne. God the Father's plans for you began in eternity before the world began and continues into the eternity that is to come.

That's when you will really see your soul's worth. When you are before the throne of God, you will hear tens of thousands of angels praise the child born in Bethlehem because of what he has done for you. Revelation 5 is like the trailer of a movie. We get to hear just a snippet of the angels' praise in heaven.

The Lamb of God is "worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth."

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!" (Revelation 5:9-10, 12).

You are of great worth in God's eyes. You are of great worth in the angels' eyes.

4. The soul's worth in your own eyes

But my question for you is this: Do you see your soul's worth?

Sadly the men who wrote the beautiful song “O Holy Night” did not. A priest asked Placide Cappeau to write a Christmas poem in 1847. After he wrote the poem, he asked his friend Adolphe Adam to write music for it. It became an instant hit. People heard this song and “the soul felt its worth.”

But Placide was a Christian in name only, and in a few short years he rejected the Christian faith all together. Adolphe was Jewish and never recognized Jesus as God’s gift to him. They wrote a song that proclaimed the worth of their souls. But they didn’t believe what they wrote. In unbelief, they rejected the one thing that would bring their souls’ everlasting worth.

My dear friends, don’t make the mistake the author and composer of this song made! If you aren’t sure that Jesus is the Christ, I invite you to join with me as we follow the promise of the Savior from creation to the present. Mark your interest on the Connection Card in the Following the Promise Bible study. We want you to know that no matter what how many times you have failed and how much guilt you carry, your soul is of infinite worth because God promised his Son to be your Savior.

There is another powerful story about “O Holy Night.” This song came to the US in 1857 when John Sullivan Dwight, an abolitionist, recognized this as the Christian argument against slavery. If my soul is of great worth in God’s sight, then the souls of every other person is of great worth. Let the song that we are about to hear remind us as to break down the prejudice that divides our country and our city.

Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother
And in His name all oppression shall cease.

You might be wondering why I’m spending so much time inviting you to become involved. Some people dismiss the church as being all about money or all about itself. Where we Christians have given that impression, please forgive us! But the church is really all about helping others find their soul’s worth in Christ.

That’s why I want to share this one last story about the song “O Holy Night.” One hundred and ten years ago this night, “O Holy Night” was the first song sung over radio waves. Reginald Fessenden sang this song over the wireless, replacing what had been just the tip-tapping of Morse code.

On Christmas Eve 1906, the wireless was the newest way to proclaim the message of Christmas. What will that new way be next year, next decade, next century? I don’t know, but I’m excited to be like the shepherds this evening, hearing of my soul’s worth, and then using every means God will give us to proclaim the soul’s worth to those around us, “glorifying and praise God for all the things we have heard and seen” (paraphrase of Luke 2:20). Amen.

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