

THE SHEPHERD SONG

by Carter Conlon

Many refer to Luke 2:1–20 as “the Christmas story” and my letter to you today is based on this Bible passage.

■ EVERYONE TO BE TAXED

The days of Roman rule in Israel were marked by heavy taxation. They levied strict and severe taxes upon all the countries conquered. According to Zondervan’s Encyclopedia, the Romans levied a multitude of taxes, including: land and real estate taxes; a poll tax; export and import taxes; crop taxes; income tax; taxes to use a road; taxes to enter certain towns; taxes on animals and vehicles; an assault tax; a sales tax; a servant tax; taxes on the transfer of property; and even an emergency tax. Most of the tax revenue was taken from the poor and the money went to support an opulent lifestyle in Rome, whose elite citizens thought it was beneath their dignity to work for a living.

One of the many Roman officials placed over a conquered nation was called a censor. The primary purpose of this position was to enforce the tax laws of Rome. This censor would come into a place like Galilee and would sell a franchise to the highest bidder, who would be responsible for collecting local taxes. Those who bought the franchises were mostly Jewish men called tax collectors. They were given a quota by the censor and then allowed to collect an open-ended commission for themselves. More often than not, they were bribed by the affluent and became very wealthy in their society. The rich would say, “Look, I will give you a certain amount of money if you

exempt me from paying all the taxes.” You can understand why tax collectors in Jesus’ day were hated by the general populous.

■ CENSUS OF CAESAR AUGUSTUS

The Roman Emperor, Augustus, decided to take a census of all the people in Israel. Ultimately the head count of the nation would ensure no one in his kingdom would escape taxation. Families were forced to leave their homes and head for the town of their birth, which was where the Jewish records were kept. Regardless of the difficult circumstances this presented, there were no exceptions to the rule. You can imagine how this became an inconvenience and personal hardship for many, even a severe loss of income.

Since Mary and Joseph were of the lineage of David they were required to make the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, which was about fifty to sixty miles away. These roads were often unprotected and notorious for gangs of thieves. Mary, who was pregnant and considered “great with child,” would have traveled slowly along this way. It was a long and arduous journey for the two of them. This was opposite to many who were moving at a faster pace to reach safety and secure better accommodations. On arrival, the inn at Bethlehem was considered “the” place to lodge. From what I have read, this was a famous place where many commercial travelers stopped to spend the night on their way to Egypt.

■ THE INCONVENIENCE OF GREED

If you were at this inn, you probably would have heard the guests grumbling and complaining about the nuisance the census had caused. Now at some point in all of the ongoing conversation the question may have been asked: “Where is God in all of this? How could He let this happen to us?” Meanwhile, Mary and Joseph had come to the inn, were knocking on the door, and were turned away.

Isn’t it ironic how the whole of society ignores God until the hard times come and then everybody blames Him? Amazing, they wanted to know where God was, yet He was right there amongst them. These were people who were concerned only for themselves in a volatile and unstable society. They were trying desperately to protect their own lifestyle and financial greed. They were too caught up in their own self-centeredness to recognize this was not an ordinary young couple with a baby about to be born. This was God in the flesh. He was coming into the world and they could not see it.

■ GOD GOES TO SHEPHERDS

Since they refused to acknowledge Him, God went to those who were not caught up in the selfish uproar of their day. *“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night and, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them”* (Luke 2:8–9).

These shepherds were not looking out for their own well being, but were caring for the sheep entrusted to them for safe keeping. It says in the Scripture angels appeared to the shepherds at night. Night in the scriptures often speaks of a time of crisis, a time of danger, and a time of death.

True shepherds today are pastors and Christian workers, who give themselves to prayer and intercession. They possess the heart of God to help others through difficult times. A true shepherd can even be a mother or father who is kneeling beside their bed in intercession for the little ones God has given them. Or the person who says it is not right for the fatherless children to be left in the streets and forgotten.

■ GOD IS IN A HUMBLE PLACE

“And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12). Where is God in all of this? He is where He has always been, reaching out to the oppressed, healing the bruised in heart. He is opening prison doors and setting people free from areas of captivity. He is giving bread to the poor, to those who are without. He is being a father to the fatherless. This is where God is. He makes His way into the midst of all the turmoil and catastrophes of mankind bringing hope and healing. And that is exactly where God’s people need to be, in the midst of human suffering reaching out with a helping hand and a word from God. The living God is in a humble place where the self-focused and proud never think to go.

The shepherds, who were faithfully tending their flocks at night, went to celebrate the birth of the Savior in a dirty and smelly manger. It is a type of the place where God’s true shepherds minister. They go where nobody else wants to go. They take

what they have, even if it is just a word of encouragement.

■ GOD HAS A WORD FOR YOU

If this describes your heart, then the Lord has given me a word for you.

“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10–11). Suddenly, in a moment of time, clarity and understanding came to the shepherds as the heavens opened. What joy, celebration and purpose must have filled their lives on the hillside that night. The Savior had come and God had given them insight and revelation.

In the same way, everything will begin to make sense to you about serving Christ. Suddenly, you know why you are a Christian, why you go to church, why you sing songs, why you read your bible, why the Holy Spirit was given to you. With understanding and clarity comes tremendous joy and purpose to your life as it did for the shepherds long ago. These are God’s promises to you.

***You really
find out who
the people
of God are
in times
of crisis.***

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:13–14). Your heart will be open to the worship of heaven. This is worship far beyond anything you might sing in church. It is far deeper;

it is the song that comes when you reach out to those impoverished and then see God provide. It is a song of confidence and trust that people can see in your life. They see a God who has given you purpose and a joy unspeakable, while they are caught up in fear of the future. In other words, the divine purpose of God, the depths and compassion of His love, will be made known to you and through you. There is hope for the future; it is about something that God wants to do now and extend into the hereafter. Hallelujah!

■ THE SHEPHERD SONG

“And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them” (Luke 2:20). Like the shepherds, yours will not be a song that is based on the circumstances of this world. It will be a song that I call, “The Shepherd Song.” You will be able to glorify and praise God for the things you have seen and heard, things that are hidden from the world around you; the things that were hidden from the self-centered people at the inn in Bethlehem. Think about it. While the crowds were grumbling into the night hours, just around the corner in a dirty stable the Son of God was born. There was glory all around and these people knew nothing about it. The shepherds, however, had seen and heard something so incredible from God they went back to what they had been called to do with praises and shouts of glory.

As I observe this procession of shepherds, I sense something stirring in my spirit. I hear heaven opening and I see something wonderful happening. I see a song coming into the heart of fathers who are turning back to this generation and saying, “I am going to heaven, but I am not leaving you behind. I do not care how many of you are standing on the street

corner, or how tough you think you are, I am not leaving you behind.”

I hear a song coming to pastors in small-towns, some of whom have been struggling with 20, 30, or 40 people. Because they have been faithful, God is about to give them a new song. They have lived through a season where they have been portrayed as failures in the church world. They have gone to seminars over the last two decades where they have been told how to “grow a church” to ten thousand. But how can you do that when there are only three hundred people in your town? If you are the pastor of a small church, I want you to take courage. You are not a failure! You are about to sing a song you have never sung in your entire life. You are about to see something of God you have never seen before. I hear these shepherds, all over the country, beginning to sing, beginning to praise God. They are getting a vision from heaven that is hidden from the self-consumed and those whose theological focus was away from God’s true purpose.

■ SONGS IN A TIME OF CALAMITY

In Isaiah 24:1–4, we read an account of a coming calamity. I cannot paint a more dismal day than what Isaiah saw. In the midst of these dark days Isaiah suddenly hears a new song in verses 14–16. In essence he was saying, “In the midst of the darkness I hear songs of glory to the Righteous One.”

Beloved, we are in for a time of worship and praise in the coming days like you have never known in your entire life. We are going to know the glory of the Lord. We are going to know something of God which does not come in times of ease—it comes only in times of calamity. It is deeper—it is a song of trust. You will see God’s faithful hand upon your children. You will begin to reach out in the Holy Spirit. The provision of God will begin to flow through you

to others. You are going to live to see how the supernatural hand of God provides. It is going to be miraculous. It is awesome when there is no other way to explain it all except that God has done it.

■ GOD’S PROVISION

Many times I have watched God do what only He could do; I have seen His faithfulness. I was visiting a halfway house that was run completely by faith. The men who lived there were just out of jail and being prepared to go back into society. One cold fall day several of the men were standing at the window praying because they had absolutely no food in the house. I heard about them praying, “Lord, we are hungry and would like something to eat today. If you could, we would like some groceries, even....” And at that moment while praying they opened their eyes and saw a woman on the other side of the street carrying two shopping bags full of groceries. “Lord, we would like some food, even like the food in those two shopping bags.”

The lady had already walked by the halfway house but as soon as the men finished praying, she stopped, crossed over the street, came back to the house. She walked up to the porch, put the two bags down and walked away! And they watched this happen before their eyes! What kind of worship do you think took place that day? The Shepherd Song! They saw the provision of God and then glorified Him for His great provision. They understood not only were they to be recipients of this amazing blessing, but they were to also be givers as the Lord enabled them.

You do not have to be afraid of the dark days ahead, in Psalm 46:1–4 we read “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the*

waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah. There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High.” The river here stands for God’s provision. You will not be listed among those who fail and faint because you will be kept supernaturally by the power of God.

This Christmas season you may be in a place of worry and doubt about the future. You may question, “Where is God? Where is Jesus as our financial markets crumble, jobs are lost and bills are due?” Hold fast to The Shepherd Song, a song of trust, hope, deliverance and purpose. Step outside of yourself and see the mighty hand of God work and provide for your every need. Celebrate His miraculous birth, and His great salvation wrought on Calvary. Rejoice in His grace and love which covers a multitude of sins. Rejoice this Christmas in the Christ who is your hope.

Several years ago the Lord gave me a song based on Psalm 46. I encourage you to read aloud the lyrics.

I will trust in God, all of my days
Though the seas may roar,
And mountains leave their place
Hearts of men may fail,
Tears on every face.
Safely I will stand, In God’s
amazing grace.

Chorus:

I will trust in God. I will trust in God
Come what may in Christ I say
I will trust in God
I will trust in God. I will trust in God
Come what may in Christ I say
I will trust in God.

Carter Conlon

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Dear Friend,

The book of Nehemiah describes a people many years ago trying to build a future in what skeptics believed to be an impossible environment (see Nehemiah 4:2). Structures all around had fallen to rubble and former gates of protection were rendered inoperative. How vulnerable the people must have felt, especially when the realization hit that all the judgments of God around them had come because of careless dealing with and false handling of the Word of God. The tendency was to break down and become one with the seemingly hopeless ruin everywhere.

Instead, God spoke to them through His servants telling them not to be sorrowful. The Word of the Lord for that moment in history was *“The joy of the Lord is your strength”* (Nehemiah 8:10). God had delighted in bringing them to Himself and giving each one the power to build anew with a strength which only He could give. So also today, you and I can stand in our difficult times, rejoicing in the eternal truth once proclaimed: *“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of GREAT JOY, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord”* (Luke 2:10–11).

Merry Christmas and may the new year bring you to a renewed understanding of the great provision, in Jesus Christ, which God has for you!

In Christ,



Carter Conlon
Senior Pastor

This message is an edited version of **“The Shepherd Song,”** a sermon given on **September 28, 2008** in the sanctuary of Times Square Church in New York City. Other sermons are available by visiting our website at tscnyc.org. You can also write to: Times Square Church, Sermon Ministry, 1657 Broadway, New York, NY 10019. You are welcome to make additional copies of this sermon for free distribution to friends. However, for all other forms of reproduction or electronic transmission existing copyright laws apply. This sermon cannot be posted on any website or webpage without written permission from Times Square Church. Unless otherwise noted, all scripturereferences are from the King James Version.

CARTER CONLON

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TIMES SQUARE CHURCH

Times Square Church was founded in 1987 by Pastor David Wilkerson, author of *“The Cross and the Switchblade.”* It is an interdenominational church located in the heart of New York City.

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WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

Sunday	10:00AM	3:00PM	6:00PM
Tuesday	7:00PM	Church Service	
Thursday	7:00PM	Prayer Meeting	
Friday	7:00PM	Church Service	

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