

SUNDAY Gospel of the Unseen “The Night Shift Workers”

Scripture:

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” – Luke 1:46-48

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” – Luke 2:8-12

MONDAY Luke 1:1-38 Two earth-shaking announcements

We will be reading the entire gospel of Luke this Lenten season. Luke described how carefully he had studied Jesus’ story. He emphasized that he (as well as earlier gospel writers) relied on eyewitness testimony. Luke may have spoken with some additional witnesses, because his gospel was the only one that began with an angel announcing that aged Elizabeth would bear Jesus’ forerunner, while young Mary would give birth to the Savior himself.

- Most of the time, angels don’t appear to tell us what God wants from us. In what ways have you learned to listen for God’s voice in your life? When you think a message or call may be from God, what ways have you learned of verifying or confirming that? What tough thing(s) do you believe God may be calling you to during this Lenten season? Are you willing to respond to God as Mary did in verse 38?
- In Luke 1:13, God’s messenger said, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah.” Months later, the same messenger said, “Do not be afraid, Mary” (verse 30). In fact, “do not be afraid” is the most common command in the entire Bible. Does the thought of God taking a direct hand in your life feel at all frightening to you? In what part of your life do you most need to hear God’s message, “Do not be afraid”?

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for Luke, for the attraction to Jesus that led him to carefully trace out and record the story. Give me an understanding, worshipping heart as I read his gospel. Amen.

TUESDAY Luke 1:39-66 God lifts up the lowly

In Elizabeth and Mary’s culture, women were second-class citizens. No male leader of her day (let alone an angel) would have greeted this woman of almost no status by saying, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” So Mary sang that God lifts up

the lowly. She and Elizabeth were living examples—a childless older woman and a single teen from a backwater town, both given key roles in God’s saving plan.

- Elizabeth welcomed Mary with God-given insight, affirming and encouraging her. She knew God was at work, and that Mary’s child was uniquely wonderful. In fact, Elizabeth was, it seems, the first person to call Jesus “Lord”: “Why do I have this honor, that the mother of MY LORD should come to me?” (verse 43) When has someone affirmed you by noticing God at work in your life? When have you encouraged someone else? Who can you affirm and encourage today?
- Having a boy was good news for Elizabeth and Zechariah. Having him all alone would, however, have been a major challenge for an aging couple to meet. How did verse 58 describe the caring, supportive network that surrounded them? Who enters into your joys, and supports you when you encounter challenges? How well are you able to enter into others’ joy and support them in return?

Prayer: Lord God, you worked out your plan through ordinary people like Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary. That gives me hope. I’m ready to follow you in whatever you have in mind for me. Amen.

WEDNESDAY Luke 1:67-2:20 “A mighty Savior”—in a manger

Zechariah’s song praised God for raising up the mighty Savior John would herald. Then the “mighty Savior” arrived—as a poor infant announced to night-shift shepherds, and laid in a manger. Pastor Hamilton noted in *The Journey: A Season of Reflections* that the shepherds were sent to find the newborn king “in a parking garage (that’s what a first-century stable was), lying on a bed of straw where the animals ate.”

- A recent Christmas song says, “This is such a strange way to save the world.” If you were God, would you trust a poor family to parent and protect the Messiah? Would you first tell night-shift shepherds, among the lowliest outcasts in their society, of the child’s birth? In what ways do God’s values challenge our society’s values? Do your personal priorities more closely match God’s values or those of the culture around us?
- “Angel” meant “messenger,” God’s messenger. Luke stressed that God revealed the meaning of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds (“the Lord has revealed to us”—verse 15; “what they had been told” —verse 17; “just as they had been told”—verse 20.) What are some of the main ways God reveals truth to you? In what ways have you learned to trust God’s revelation, while also using the power of thought and analysis God has given you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for the good news of your birth, for me, and for all people. Help me this day to live in a spirit of gratitude for your great gift of yourself. Amen.

THURSDAY Luke 2:21-52 The challenge, and the cost, of parenting the Messiah Luke described Simeon and Anna, two elderly servants of God who recognized in the infant Jesus the hope for which they had been waiting. Simeon warned Mary that her life would hold pain as well as joy. Then Luke told about Jesus’ first Passover, at which he showed a precocious insight into the things of God, while Mary and Joseph experienced a foretaste of the pain and puzzlement they would face at times as their extraordinary son grew up.

- Reflect on each phrase of Simeon's words in verses 34-35. Ask yourself in what ways each phrase pointed to one aspect of what happened in Jesus' life and ministry. As you reflect on your own story, in what ways has your loyalty to Jesus brought challenges and adjustments into your life? Have you found facing those challenges for Jesus' sake worth it?
- The story of Jesus' first Passover is the only glimpse of his life as a boy in any of the gospels. What do you learn from this story about the special challenges his parents faced in raising God's son? In what ways did the story foreshadow how effective Jesus would be when, about 18 years later, he began preaching and teaching?

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for the courage, commitment and sensitivity to your will that Mary and Joseph brought to their amazing life calling. Shape me into a person who reflects your love in all my relationships. Amen.

FRIDAY Luke 3:1-22 The Baptizing forerunner and the Baptized Messiah

Nearly four hundred years had gone by with no clear prophetic voice in Israel. When John the Baptist began preaching, forcefully and urgently calling people to change their lives, he drew crowds hungry for a word from God. He baptized people as a symbol of cleansing and change. Faithful to his life mission, he pointed beyond himself, and had the privilege of baptizing the Savior whose way he'd prepared.

- John the Baptist had a very clear sense of mission: to lead people to be baptized as a sign of repentance, and accepting God's forgiveness of sins (verse 3). He passionately called people to change and be baptized because he felt a sense of urgency. To what extent do you feel a sense of urgency in pursuing God's path for your life? What steps help you keep your commitment to God's call strong and focused?
- John the Baptist did not baptize people as an end in itself. He was preparing the way for the Savior. As scholar N. T. Wright explained, "John was doing what the prophet Isaiah had said: preparing a pathway for the Lord himself to return to his people. This was the time. Rescue was at hand." Each of us also can prepare the way for the Lord through prayer, worship, generosity toward others and the like. How are you preparing the way for Jesus Christ to work in your life? In the lives of others?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to see clearly your call on my life. Give me the courage and conviction of John the Baptist in living out that calling and doing your will. Amen.

SATURDAY Luke 3:23-4:13 Jesus' identity clarified

For readers today, the "genealogies" (lists of names and relationships) are probably the most "so what?" parts of the Bible. But Luke made a key point with his genealogy, seen if we put it side by side with the list in Matthew 1. Matthew started Jesus' lineage with Abraham, the father of the Hebrew nation. Luke came (verse 34) to Jacob, Isaac, Abraham—but went right on, all the way to "the son of Adam, the son of God." The genealogy highlighted the sense of identity Jesus carried into his temptations. By saying "IF you are the Son of God," the tempter asked, in effect, "Do you know who you are?" Because Jesus knew, he refused the temptation to try to prove his identity in self-serving ways.

- All of the temptations tugged at Jesus to act in ways that would make his life easier by matching popular hopes of what the Messiah would do. But Jesus, committed to God's way as taught in Scripture, refused to "play to the crowd." Was there ever a time when a desire to please others drew you away from God's purpose for your life? What steps help you keep focused and faithful despite any pressures you face?

Prayer: Jesus, son of God, I face temptations every day. Plant the principles of your word firmly in my heart, that, like you, I might stay on God's path and resist the lure of going my own way. Amen.

Family Activity: Did you know shepherds were the first people to learn of Jesus' birth? Shepherds took care of stinky, dirty animals and yet they were trusted to share the news the King had been born! As a family, think of the people in your lives who have tough, thankless jobs whose work is very important. You might include childcare workers, crossing guards, farmers, missionaries and others. How can you acknowledge their work and thank them for all they do to serve? Maybe you could make cards, bake treats or simply say, "Thank you!" Let them know you are praying for them, too. Thank God for those who serve quietly and faithfully in sometimes difficult circumstances.

This study was adapted from The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection.