For the last two weeks, we have been learning the Story of Christmas through the characters that are part of the story: animals, angels, shepherds, Mary and Joseph, and of course, baby Jesus and so on. Last week, we learned how the angels came to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus. Today, we are looking into what happened afterward, that is, how the shepherds reacted to the “news of great joy!” Here is the story from Luke 2: 1-20,

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

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.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,**

**“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”**

When **the angels had left them and gone into heaven**, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

In this story, we read that when the shepherds received the “news of great joy!” from the angels, they hastily went looking for the child Messiah. And when they found him, they told everyone about it.

Interestingly, God chose to tell the shepherds about the birth of Jesus before anyone else. Who were they? What was special about them?

By reading Luke, there is nothing else to learn about them but that they were “shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” Not even adjectives are used to describe them to give insight into the kind of people they were. As far as we know, they had no distinctive characteristics that set them apart. We can only go by what shepherds were like in general back then. So, what was a shepherd like back then?

Throughout the history of Israel, shepherding was a noble profession. Abel was the first to have this job, followed by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and of course, king David. Even God calls Godself a shepherd too, you know, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want…” (Psalms 23)

However, by the time we come to the birth of Jesus, shepherding had lost its luster. Shepherds made up the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of the lepers. For example, in the Talmud (treatise ‘Avodah-Zarah’), which is a collection of interpretations and insight from the rabbis, we read these words: “No help is to be given to heathen or shepherds.” In other words, shepherds were held in low estimation and were considered and treated as outcasts.

This is significant to understand how unusual it was to have the angels appear to these lowly shepherds; they were not of any high esteem, instead they were considered underserving and unclean and were treated with contempt and mistrust.

I know most people think of the shepherds as jolly fellas looking after their pretty and puffy sheep, but that was nothing like the life they had experienced. This is an example of what happens when we sanitize the stories in the Bible; it is like the filters people use nowadays when posting pictures and videos on social media to make themselves appear unblemished—but it is not real. But the shepherds had no filters and were not unblemished. Instead, they were everything like us: real flesh, sweat, smell, and with all kinds of existential needs and issues.

Why does this matter to us? Because many people believe they have to be special or need to do something special to approach God and be blessed. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is nothing in the Bible to support those beliefs. Instead, we see those in the margins and the outcasts becoming a central part of God’s story. That is what Jesus meant when he said, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last,” and, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Matthew 20:16; Luke 5:32)

This means that nothing will happen if we think we will receive forgiveness and blessings because we are better than others or did something to deserve it. Instead, some of the most precious attributes in the Bible are humility and willingness.

In last Sunday’s message, I said that God does not come to the powerful because of their power, or the rich because of their wealth, or the smart because of their intellect, but to the kindhearted with a willing spirit. That is what the shepherds were, simply humble and willing. When God came to them, they believed and acted on the message given to them, running off to find Jesus and telling everyone about it.

My friends, that is why we have those smelly and outcasted shepherds in the greatest story ever told: because they were no special, and they knew it, and they were simply willing.

Last week, I shared my story of experiencing angels as I prayed for direction for my life. Now let me tell you how I got there.

I was raised in the church. My grandmother, Francisca, would take my brother and me to Sunday School Class, worship service, Vacation Bible School, and so on. (She did that because my mom was always working to provide for us as a single mother.) So, I grew up learning the stories of the Bible and acquiring a moral compass that kept me out of trouble—for the most part.

In my teenage years, I kind of wandered around, but nothing bad. Then, when I finished high school and began to figure out what was next for me, I had an existential crisis: I was not sure who I was supposed to be. During that time, I remembered my faith and began searching for God. I would go to my room and pray, read the Bible, and listen to worship music—in cassettes, CDs were not a thing yet, at least not for me.

What happened to me at that time is that I started acting on the faith that had been nurtured in me. For years, I acquired knowledge about God, but my faith was passive since I was only on the receiving end, which I needed as a child. I was fed faith for years, but now I was moving on to the next chapter in my faith journey. It was my turn to act on the belief I had received just as my grandmother acted on hers for my sake.

In retrospect, I was like those shepherds (except for the smelly part—I am allowed to believe that, ok). I knew about the Messiah, but I was not actively seeking him, not because I did not want him but maybe because I had not realized I needed him. As a child, going to church was my reality, and I was safe; but as I grew up, the world became real too (and we all know how dangerous that is), and I knew I was not going to make it my own.

My point by telling my story as it relates to what is happening with the shepherds is that unless we act on our faith, we won’t fully experience God in our lives. Many of us have spent years in church on the receiving end, with a sort of passive faith. There is nothing wrong with that, but at what point do we move from being fed as children and start acting on what we believe?

Here is a question for us: Have you ever wondered what it is like to act on your faith and do things that may look crazy to others but in your heart they make perfect sense?

That is exactly what every woman and man of faith in the Bible did, stuff that seemed crazy to others. They were not better than you or me or had supernatural skills; they simply were willing and acted on what they hoped. And that is what faith is all about, acting on what we hope.

My friends, that is how I came to be here with you today. I simply acted on what I hoped, and once I did, it became real. It was the same case with the shepherds. When they received the news about the Messiah they had been waiting for, they acted on their hope and found the “child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

All this to say this: Faith believes what others do not believe; Faith sees what others do not see; Faith does what others do not do; Faith moves us to act, to do, to try, to build, to attempt, to expand, to say “no” to sin and “yes” to righteousness, to join, to speak out, to move forward, and to dare to dream beyond our means.

You are enough and you do not need filters or anything special to a part of God’s story. All you need is a willing heart and the courage to act on what you know God has spoken to your heart.