

Ah , we had gotten our peek
and opened our presents before Christmas.
and no one would be the wiser.

Well, actually there were a couple of people
who were much, much wiser than we thought.
On Christmas we opened some presents we hadn't seen before.

Are there any of you
who can't resist taking a peek at your Christmas presents?

Well this Advent Season in our sermon series, "Open Before Christmas,"
we want to encourage you to take a peek at the greatest gift you'll ever get.

Actually we want you to do more than just take a peek.
We want you to open your heart to this great gift of God,

God wants us to open our eyes, our ears, our mouths, our hands,
and our hearts that the Christ Child might be born in us today, yes even today.

You see on God's timeline,
any day, every day, even today, especially today,
can be Christmas for any one, for someone, for everyone,
even you and I.

If you've already had Christmas,
If you've already accepted Jesus as your Savior,
If he has been born in your heart,
then today the Spirit of God is challenging you to open your heart wider,
to make more room in your heart for Jesus to grow,
that your faith may grow, that your faith may mature.

Let's take a step back in time
and see what we can learn from the shepherds,
as they opened their hearts to Jesus.

The shepherd's were doing what shepherds do,
"watching their flocks at night."

These particular shepherds were probably
on watch in an area called Shepherd's Field.

Shepherd's field is an open area four to five miles
between Jerusalem and Bethlehem where flocks graze.

Actually I like what the Scripture says,
"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby,"

These guys were "living out in the fields" just outside of Bethlehem.

They were the homeless, no sleeping bags or tents either.
 But who cares when you get to sleep under
 those beautiful star lit nights.
 At least they had a job, a job no one else wanted.

One thing to their credit.
 They were watching the sheep
 that were used for sacrifice in the temple and at Passover.
 And these sheep were perfect without mark or blemish.

That reminds me of a story a hospital Chaplin once told me.
 He was trying to get his Jewish friend to read the New Testament.
 The friend finally but reluctantly agreed.

One of his first comments after reading the Christmas story was,
 It makes perfect sense that Jesus,
 “your lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”
 was born in Bethlehem,
 because, the perfect lambs for sacrifices “came out” of Bethlehem.

Isn't it wonderful the way God teaches.
 The perfect lambs bred, without mark or blemish,
 used for sacrifice in Jerusalem
 and the lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice, Jesus, who was without sin
 were both bred and born in Bethlehem.

Back to the shepherds.
 Even though these shepherds watched these special flocks,
 they were unwelcome and unwanted in most social settings.
 They were thought to be uneducated, unclean, and unreliable,

They were unclean because
 they lived in caves with their sheep,
 so they always smelled of urine, sweat, and sheep dung.

They were considered unreliable
 because they grazed their sheep ‘once and a while’
 in other shepherd's pastures
 and were known to have “borrowed” sheep from other flocks.

They were considered so unreliable and untrustworthy
 that their testimony wasn't accepted in court.

That makes it even more amazing and more amusing that God chooses them
 to be the first to see, hear, and tell that Jesus was born.

Verse 9, **“An angel of the Lord appeared to them,
 and the glory of the Lord shown around them...”**

They opened their eyes, they bugged out.
 And I'll bet they opened their ears, too.
 They would have heard the angel say, Luke 2.11-12,
**"Today in the town of David a Savior is born to you,
 He is Christ the Lord.
 This is a sign unto you;
 You will find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."**

Have you ever held your finger out to a baby?
 The baby takes your finger, grips your finger and tugs.
 You feel that tug not only on your finger but in your heart as well.

Molly Brown said,
 "Christmas is love tugging at men's (and women's, and children's) hearts
 with the powerful grip of a tiny hand reaching out from a bed of straw
 drawing them back to God."

The shepherd's got it-they saw it, they heard it,
 they felt it, and they grabbed it.

Their reaction-I think the Message says it best, Luke 2.115b-17,
**"Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can
 And see for ourselves what God has revealed to us.**

**They left running (it probably took at least an hour to get there)
 and found Mary and Joseph ,
 and the baby lying in the manger.
 Seeing was believing.**

**They told everyone they met
 what the angels had said about this child."**

These guys must have been hopping, skipping, and jumping for joy.

Think about it.
 If you get that most special gift for Christmas,
 Or someone gives you something special,
 or does something special for you,
 or speaks kind words in a moment of worry,

Or better yet, you have this wonderful out of the world experience
 aren't you likely to tell someone, anyone, everyone about it?
 You tell it once, twice, three times..103times, 1003 times, a million and three times

The shepherds had this out of the world experience alright
 and they told Mary, Joseph, every two legged
 and probably even every four legged creatures in sight,
 because they were so happy, so full of joy.

And you know what, they kept telling people.

Again from the Message, Luke 2.20,

**“The shepherders returned and let loose,
glorifying and praising God for everything they had seen and heard.”**

Luke 2.18 tells us that,

“All who heard the shepherders were impressed (amazed)!”

And why wouldn't they be, they saw real change in the lives of the shepherds.

They'd gone from dull to delight, from grim to glow.

Those shepherds had “opened their hearts” to the Son of God.

There are times though, when you know you're loved,

or something great happens,

and you can't find the words to tell about it,

But at the very least, you can't help but show it.

A group of prospectors set out from Bannock, Montana in search of gold.

They went through many hardships,

and several of their little company died en route.

Defeated, discouraged and downhearted,

those that were left headed back to the city.

As they tethered their ponies on a creek side,

one of them casually picked up a little stone from the creek bed.

He asked his buddy for a hammer, took the hammer, hit the rock, and said,

“There may be gold here.”

They got busy and that afternoon,

they panned twelve dollars worth of gold.

They panned the next day and got \$50 of gold

which in their day was a lot of money.

They'd struck it rich!

They needed more supplies so

they saddled up and headed back to Bannock

vowing not to say a word about their good fortune

They quietly shopped buying the supplies they needed

not saying a word about the gold.

But when they got ready to go back,

there were three hundred men ready to follow them.

Who had told them? No one!

You could tell by the look on their faces.

To open your heart to Jesus is not just about good fortune-

It's about opening up your heart and accepting you're a sinner,

It's about opening up your heart and accepting that God loves you and forgives you,
 It's about opening up your heart accepting that Jesus the Son of God, died in your place on the cross,
 It's about opening up your heart and letting God rule and reign in your life,
 letting his love work in your life.

Let me leave you with a wonderful picture of what it means to "open your heart."
 Rose Kennedy was the matriarch of the well-known Kennedy clan
 and a woman who experienced a huge amount of heartache, sorrow, and shame.

She has had two sons assassinated,
 a son, grandson, and daughter were killed in accidents,
 family members that have struggled with addictions,
 and has had a family that has been surrounded and submerged in scandals.

Pastor Jess Moody tells us
 that Rose continued to stay strong in her faith until
 her daughter Rosemary was born challenged and had to be institutionalized.

Instead of giving it to God, Rose "gave up on God."
 She withdrew and started to become bitter woman.

Her maid lovingly confronted Rose about her attitude.
 She said, "Mrs. Kennedy you'll never be happy again
 until you open your heart and it becomes a manger,
 where the Christ child can be born."

I love that line.
 "You'll never be happy again until you open your heart
 and it becomes a manger where the Christ child can be born."

Rose Kennedy fired the maid on the spot
 but that night the maid's words burned in her heart.

As she knelt by her bed,
 the Spirit moved,
 the maid's words quickened,
 and Rose Kennedy's heart softened.
 She open her heart
 and it become a manger for the Lord Jesus Christ.

And by the way she hired the maid back.

Will yo , "open your heart,"
 open your heart and make it a manger for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's open our hearts now and pray for that today...

