

The Second Noel

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From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

December 24, 2025

Luke 2:8-20

Now in that same 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, and 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, just as it had been told them.

“The first Nowell the angel did say, was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay...” Those words mark the opening verse to a beloved carol of the season. It was written in 1823, the same year that a poem named “A Visit from Saint Nicholas” was published. You might know it better as “The Night Before Christmas.”

“The First Nowell” is a hymn that tells a story as over the course of six stanzas it recalls the wondrous events that followed the birth of Jesus. It speaks of an angel delivering news to shepherds who look up and see a great star, of wise men being led by the same celestial body and presenting gifts to the Christ child. The carol then concludes with this invitation: *“Then let us all with one accord sing praises to our heavenly Lord, that hath made heaven and earth of nought, and with his blood our life hath bought.”* After those words and each of the stanzas is a refrain which four times exclaims “*Nowell*” before ending “*born is the King of Israel.*”

It is a wonderful song, but there’s a gap in its narrative. It opens with that angelic message and names the ones who heard it, but the next verse skips ahead to focus on the star and lines 3-5 all talk about the magi. The carol makes no mention of the response from those who first heard the news. What did the shepherds do? The song doesn’t tell us. Scripture does.

Those familiar verses we heard moments ago describe how men were minding their own business when an angel appeared and said, “Do not be afraid...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.” The messenger gives them a sign to help locate the child—“wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” Before those men can fully absorb the news, a multitude, or as other manuscripts put it, “an *army* of the heavenly host” appears and sings praises to God.

The angel offered the first noel, the initial telling of Good News, and shepherds responded. “Let us go now to Bethlehem,” they say, “and see

this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” They find the family, tell those parents how they had heard about the birth, and then depart, leaving Mary to ponder it all. Luke concludes, “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

The angel brought the first noel. The shepherds, despite their response being omitted from the carol, offer what might be called the *second* noel. As they heard the news, went to see for themselves, and shared their report with Mary and Joseph before returning home with joy. In so doing, the Scriptural record suggests that the first noel changed them or at least evoked a response. That remains God’s intention still, even though it doesn’t always happen.

As the story is told of a pastor walking through a grocery store one day who recognizes a man who had visited his church on occasion. As they chat, the minister asks why the man doesn’t attend services more often. In an equally bold response, the man says, “It’s because I don’t like your sermons and you always sing the same two hymns.” The minister was surprised. He could handle criticism of his homilies, but the church had a strong and diverse music ministry like ours. “I don’t understand,” he says. “What two hymns do we always sing?” And the man replies, “‘Silent Night’ and ‘O Little Town Of Bethlehem.’” (*Presbyterians Today*, 12/98, p. 5)

Clearly, the first noel had not yet taken hold in him, but that doesn’t mean we are to stop singing or sharing its news. Had the shepherds not responded to the message from one angel there’s no telling where you or I would be on this night. Yet because they shared it, the second noel became the third noel and the fourth noel until eventually the Good News reached us.

We are here because life-altering news did not stay with the shepherds but was passed on. That's the way the Gospel continues to be spread, one person at a time. The message is heard, often when least expected, but it stirs something, leaving people with a choice: to accept it and be changed or ignore it. That was true with news first proclaimed by an angel long ago and remains the case for all those other messages that have the potential to transform our lives, too.

One of my favorite reads in recent times is a book entitled *The Year without a Purchase*. It tells the true story of a Nashville couple named Gabby and Scott Dannemiller who vow to go twelve months without buying anything that isn't necessary. They took that step because they had served as Presbyterian mission workers in Guatemala, where they had been struck by the happiness of its people who had little in a material way. Shortly after returning to Tennessee, though, they quickly got caught up again in our consumeristic culture. So, they pledge that for a year, they will only buy things that are essential and focus instead on creating memorable experiences. The book tells of their experiment including challenges the effort created.

One of the first ones came when Scott was preparing for a business trip and remembered that his suitcase was broken. Their rules didn't allow him to buy a new one, so he looked around their home for a substitute. Gabby won't let him borrow hers, believing—rightly, he points out—that it would come back damaged. The only one he can find belongs to his daughter. She is six years old, and the bag is purple. “We’re not talking royal purple,” he writes, “Not even violet. This suitcase is lavender [with a big unicorn sticker on it]. No self-respecting businessperson would dare to be seen with a bag like this. But I have no self-respect. And I’m not buying anything this year. So, I pack [and head] to Denver.” He gets a few looks at the airport and when boarding the plane, but after a short flight is settled into his hotel room. Concerned with what his clients will think, he decides to tackle their question head-on and tapes a sign to the front of the

bag. It reads: “Yes, I am a businessman carrying a lavender [unicorn] suitcase.”

The next morning, he goes downstairs with the bag. “I park my things by a two-seat table and head to the breakfast buffet. When I return, a woman is seated at the table next to mine. She has an impeccable hairstyle and wears a dark grey business suit. Instead of facing her breakfast, she has swung her legs in the direction of my bag. She’s bent over at the waist, holding her reading glasses in place at the temple as if they are going to fly off her face. She sees me move out of the corner of her eye. ‘Oh! Sorry! Is this your bag?’ ‘Unfortunately, yes. If you like it, we could work out a trade.’ She leans back and removes her glasses. ‘That’s OK. I’ll pass.’

“I place my breakfast on my table and slide into my chair. I adjust my napkin and pour milk into a bowl of Raisin Bran. She interrupts. ‘So, are you going to tell me the story behind your bag, or are you going to make me ask?’ I tell her about trying to go a year without buying any stuff, and some of the roadblocks we have hit thus far. Namely, my suitcase. ‘I bet you’ll save a lot of money,’ she interjects. ‘That remains to be seen. I hope we save money, but the main reason we’re doing it is to try and get back to what’s important. Connecting and sharing experiences with people. We’ve noticed that stuff sometimes gets in the way. At least for us.’

“‘It’s funny,’ she says, without a hint of laughter. ‘I’m on the road a lot, so I miss out on time with my kids. I feel bad about it, so I usually pick up a gift or some trinket in the airport on the way home to remind them I’m thinking of them while I’m gone. But just last night I was thinking I need to stop doing that.’ She explains how her kids often ask why she travels so much, and she tells them she works so they can afford the nice things they have. And in her eyes, I see her silently questioning the value in what she provides...I recognize the look. Like gazing into a mirror. ‘Your project is interesting, that’s for sure...It’s got me thinking. My son’s birthday is coming up. I was going to get him some video games, but he has dozens

already. Maybe we should just do something together? Just the two of us? Alone?’ ‘Maybe so,’ I say. ‘Maybe so.’

“And that’s where the conversation ends,” Scott writes. “We say our polite good-byes, but we don’t exchange numbers. Don’t even get each other’s names. I’ll never know what her son got for his birthday. Never know if she is traveling any less. But in that one moment, we dove beneath the surface of everyday chatter to uncover the story behind the stuff. Stripping away the façade. Discovering. We are so much more than what we own.” (Dannemiller, Scott. *The Year without a Purchase*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2015, pp. 61-2).

Beyond what Luke records, we don’t know what happened to the recipients of the first noel either. After they initially share the Good News, those men disappear from the pages of Scripture, leaving us only to guess what became of them. Are they changed forever by that encounter, or do they go back to their work and only occasionally think about the wondrous events from that night? Do any of them, decades later, become followers of the one who would call himself the Good Shepherd, or do they soon forget about that child and his parents?

We aren’t told. All we know is that they received the message from angels, as have we, and had a choice to make, as do we.

“*The first Nowell the angels did say.*” The second noel? That one is entirely up to you.