

LUKE 2:8-20

A RUMOUR OF ANGELS

“In the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths 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,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’

“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”¹

The shepherds had already turned in for the night. Assigned responsibility to guard the flocks destined for Temple worship, one shepherd remained on watch standing on the watchtower, the *Migdal Eder*, the tower situated close to Bethlehem, on the road to Jerusalem. These were not ordinary shepherds; each man was a priest qualified for Temple worship. The flocks the shepherds were guarding were destined for sacrifice in the Temple. The flocks were pastured near Bethlehem year-round and these particular shepherds watched the Temple-flocks throughout the year.²

On that one dramatic night, the flocks were resting under their watchful eyes, flocks that were soon to be brought to Jerusalem for sacrifice during the Pascal observance. Almost all of the sheep resting before them would soon be sacrificed and slaughtered. Little did they know that another lamb was about to be born. This lamb, also, was destined for sacrifice.

These shepherds should not have been surprised at what was about to take place; after all, they were well-versed in the Talmudic writings. They had been trained in the ancient writings; they knew that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Not only had Micah spoken of that birth,³ but various Targums were united in pointing to Bethlehem as the place where Messiah would be born. Moreover, it was from the *Migdal Eder*, the sacred watchtower from which Temple flocks were guarded, that His birth would be announced.⁴ However, much like modern worshippers, they had grown familiar with the sacred writings and shoved the meaning far from them.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Information concerning the shepherds and their responsibilities is taken from Alfred Edersheim, **The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, vol. 1** (Longmans, Green, and Co., New York, NY 1896), 186–189

³ See MICAH 5:2

⁴ E.g., **Targum Pseudo-Jonathan** on GENESIS 35:21

One shepherd was awake; he was posted to watch for predators and to ensure that the sheep didn't become restless and wander off during the night. The other shepherds were in various stages of sleep. All alike were jolted awake by the brilliance of a light that shone from the heavens. Bathed in light so white that it is indescribable, they squinted or shielded their eyes with their hands as they looked up in terror. What could cause such blinding brightness?

Had these shepherd-priests actually given thought to the matters they had studied so long, they would have known that they were in the very place consecrated by tradition as the place where the Messiah was first to be revealed. They had not thought of that announcement since the days they had first read those ancient tomes. Suddenly, the boundary between heaven and earth blurred and merged to allow an angel in his full glory to appear before them. Enwrapped in a robe of light, the angel blinded them whenever they attempted to look; and, yet, they could not look away. Their eyes were drawn to see the one standing before them.

Surprise, awe, terror all mingled to focus their minds to hear what the angel was about to say. It was as if the panic that had first gripped them was replaced by a sense of calm as the divine being spoke. He was not delivering judgement, as they might have expected; he brought another message that created expectation and anticipation in their hearts.

"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" [LUKE 2:10-13].

Israel had waited for long years—so long that most had forgotten why they waited. Oh, they knew the Messiah was prophesied, but they had lived as though He would not really come. No one expected Him now! However, this angel announced that Messiah had indeed been born. And the sign of His presence was that He would be lying in a manger, wrapped in swaddling cloths. The shepherds were well acquainted with the use of swaddling cloths to wrap the newborn lambs. They would tear the old garments that had been worn by the priests to wrap the lambs, drying them and preparing them to nurse from their mothers. But, a child wrapped in such cloths? How these shepherd-priests must have wondered at what they had heard.

Then, as if to dispel any lingering questions they might have harboured, a multitude of the heavenly hosts burst through the boundary and into earth's dark night. It seemed as if these angelic beings had only been waiting for the announcement as a signal to begin praising God. They glorified God, saying:

"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

[LUKE 2:14]

It was as though all Heaven united in offering praise. Only once before had mortals heard the heavenly host unite in such praise. Isaiah writes, "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!’

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke” [ISAIAH 6:1-4].

Suddenly, as suddenly as the angel had appeared at the first, the angels were gone, the sky dimmed and the night sounds returned. Had this really happened? Had they actually seen and heard angels? In stunned silence the shepherds looked at one another. Their eyes betrayed the questions that arose in their minds, until one, and then another, and at last all of them began to speak almost as one, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us” [LUKE 2:15]. In haste, they abandoned the sheep they had been watching and rushed up the terraced height to the town; but, how would they know where to look for the child? The angel had not given them an address!

He had said that the child would be lying in a manger; so, they could bypass all the houses that lined the narrow streets. The caves in which sheep were sometimes housed lay behind the town and against the hillside. Perhaps there was a light in one of the caves, a necessary light permitting Joseph and Mary to tend the newborn child. That light would be sufficient to guide the shepherds. And when they found the place where the little family was sheltered, indeed, they did see the child lying in a manger. It was just as the angel had said.

What now? How could they be silent about what they had witnessed? We don’t know how many shepherds there may have been, but we can imagine them speaking excitedly to everyone they met. No doubt, they spoke to those they may have met in the fields, and not on that one night only. For some days they would have been telling of what they had seen and heard. These were priests! I can imagine that they bruited in the Temple what they had seen and heard. Perhaps even Simeon and Anna were prepared for what they were about to witness through the shepherds’ account. All who heard were being prepared to look for salvation in Israel. One thing we know for certain, “All who heard [their account] wondered at what the shepherds told them” [LUKE 2:18]. How could the shepherds not return, “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” [LUKE 2:20]?

Let me make an observation here. When an individual has met the Christ, when an individual has witnessed God’s grace and mercy, he cannot be silent. Having bowed in the presence of the Son of God, an individual will never again be the same. People may go to church, but when they meet the One who gave His life to redeem fallen people, they cannot be silent. They will tell others of what they have heard and seen. The shepherds were doing precisely what all who meet the Christ do—they make known all that was told of Him, they move about glorifying and praising God for all they have experienced.

Note one other verse: “Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” [LUKE 2:19]. Mary treasured up all these things. She would always remember how the angel had told her that she would bear the Son of God into the world. She would never forget that Heaven and earth were merged at the birth of God’s Son. In a few days she would go to the Temple to present her Son as required under the Law. Entering the Temple, she would hear the prophecy of old Simeon [see LUKE 2:22-35] and she would hear the prophetic word delivered by the aged widow, Anna [see LUKE 2:36-38]. Ever after, Mary would ponder all that had taken place at the birth of her firstborn Son. She would turn over in her mind what was said of Him, contemplating all that God was doing.

Simeon would warn her, “A sword will pierce through your own soul” [LUKE 2:35a]. It would be thirty-three years later that she would stand beside a cruel Roman cross as her firstborn Son gave His life a sacrifice for sinful people. “Standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother and His mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene” [JOHN 19:25].

Standing nearby was the disciple whom Jesus loved, whom we know as His cousin, John. I cannot imagine the sorrow Mary experienced that dark day. Hanging on that crude, Roman cross giving His life as a sacrifice for sinful mankind, Jesus thought of His mother. He spoke to her, "Woman, behold your son," [JOHN 19:26]. Jesus commended Mary into the care of John, "Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother'" [JOHN 19:27a]! The divine text informs us, "From that hour the disciple took her to his own home" [JOHN 19:27b].

After this, Jesus would cry out with a loud voice, "It is finished" [JOHN 19:30], bow His head and give up His Spirit. Because a holy day was at hand, a soldier came to ensure that the criminals would suffocate quickly. He would break the legs of the condemned criminals so they could no longer lift themselves to draw a tortured breath. However, seeing that Jesus was already dead, the soldier simply pierced His side with a spear. When the spear pierced Jesus' side after He had yielded up His Spirit, that it was as though a sword pierced Mary's soul. You may be assured that His mother did not desert Him, even when He had dismissed her. Surely the dreadful words Simeon had spoken when the child was presented in the Temple came rushing to Mary's mind, "A sword will pierce through your own soul" [LUKE 2:35a].

It is difficult for us to remember in this season that is so joyful for most, that Christmas marks the birth of the Suffering Servant. Isaiah had prophesied of the Messiah,

"Surely He has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed Him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But He was pierced for our transgressions;
He was crushed for our iniquities;
upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace."

[ISAIAH 53:4, 5]

Christmas can be a very hard time for many families. I look at the news and each day brings another story of sorrow for a family. I hear the prayer requests of our own people, the compassion they exhibit for others who are suffering pain, illness and grief at the empty chair at a family gathering. One need but think of families in Germany who are grieving this week because a vicious, practitioner of the Religion of Peace drove a truck into a crowded Christmas market. Earlier this month, we learned that at least seven people had died in wildfires that engulfed Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Tornadoes in Alabama and Tennessee killed five people on the final day of November. A plane crash killed most of a Brazilian soccer team. One of the men who died on that flight had learned only a week earlier that he would be a father. A child will grow up never knowing his or her father. In our own community, we pray for a family that has suffered the death of a beloved mother, and we pray compassionately following the death of a family member in yet another family. There is little joy in such instances this year.

We need some good news. Here's a news item to warm your heart. "Phoebe Brown is a second-grade student in Independence, Missouri. While grocery shopping with her mother and sister, she found a discarded lottery ticket. To her surprise, the ticket was worth \$100. Rather than spend the money on herself, Phoebe chose to buy groceries for families in need. Her proud mom told reporters, 'For a mother, it's more than you could possibly imagine.'"⁵

⁵ Jim Denison, "Girl finds \$100, feeds families in need," <https://www.denisonforum.org/columns/cultural-commentary/girl-finds-100-feeds-families-need/>, accessed 1 December 2016

That is good news, wouldn't you agree? Here's even better news. Jesus was born that He might offer His life as a sacrifice for the sin of fallen mankind. Jesus, the God-man, provided an infinite sacrifice, taking upon Himself all the sin of all mankind. Hanging on the cross, Jesus, who is the Christ, became the greatest sinner ever; He bore all the wicked, despicable, detestable evil of all mankind to the cross.

One of the truly great statements of Paul's writings occurs in the Letter to the Church in Colossae. There, the Apostle wrote, "You, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" [**COLOSSIANS 2:13-15**].

You see, the Good News of Christmas is that Christ did come to give His life as a sacrifice for sin. However, He conquered death, rising from the dead and bringing life and light to all who will receive Him as Master over life. We do not serve a dead Saviour; we serve a Living Saviour who conquered death, hell and the grave.

Would you have a blessed Christmas this year? This is what you must do. "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Master,' believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be set free. It is with the heart that one believes and is made right with God, and it is through open agreement with God that one is set free."⁶ The Word of God promises, "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Master shall be set free" [**ROMANS 10:13**].

Let's join the shepherds who on that first Christmas night, worshipped and praised God. Let's make this Christmas Day a time of fellowship with Christ the Lord. In this way, we will turn the holidays into holy days. If we transform this day into a holy day, God will instruct us how to transform the sufferings of a broken, sinful world into the means of encountering grace. "If a girl can use a discarded lottery ticket to feed the hungry, what can God do with your next prayer?"⁷ Amen.

⁶ Author's free translation of **ROMANS 10:9, 10**

⁷ Denison, *ibid*.