

The Night of Nights

As reenacted in nativity scenes and Christmas pageants down through the history of western civilization, this story, in various ways, whether in part or whole, is told:

God promised Israel a coming Messiah. God chose a teenage virgin to be the mother of Israel's promised Messiah. The virgin was engaged to a young and moral carpenter. A crisis pregnancy occurred. An angel of the Lord alerted Joseph that Mary's child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Angels announced Messiah's birth to shepherds on a night vigil near a little Judean town of Bethlehem. Magi from the East visited the infant. To preserve the rights of his royal family to reign, paranoid King Herod ordered the infanticide of all male children under two years of age.

On the very night of our Savior's birth, Luke, a physician turned historian, records that, "**there were some shepherds out in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night**" (Luke 2:8). Possessing gnarled and scared hands and countenancing weather-beaten faces, these ordinary men worked the grave-yard shift protecting their sheep, some of which were probably marked for eventual sacrifice at the temple about six miles away. With slings, crooked staffs, and studded clubs, these men risked their lives to protect their sheep from predatory animals and criminal rustlers.

Unbeknownst to them, one particular night was a holy night. The sheep were resting comfortably. The only sound that penetrated the quiet night was an occasional "baaaa!" of a sheep. Whether standing or sitting, these nameless shepherds breathed in the crisp night air as they fought off sleep's beckoning call. It was a night like many others until

The night sky suddenly exploded with the light of God's glory, a bright light that revealed the menacing form of an angel standing nearby. The sight of the angel terrorized these veteran guardians of the night. Had the angel of death come for them? This season, *Hallmark* will design, print, distribute and sell millions of Christmas cards. Many of these cards will bear images of cuddly, winged, and romantic looking angels. I doubt that any will bear the intimidating visage of "**an angel from the Lord**" who frightened to death those veteran shepherd-warriors, and who therefore uttered to them, "**Do not be afraid**" (Luke 2:9-10).

In contrast to the warm and fuzzy feelings people experience during this time of year, it might strike a disconcerting note to even the casual reader of the gospels that fear was a pervasive emotion of the first Christmas. Matthew records that, "[A]n **angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife'**" (Matthew 1:20). When he saw an angel of the Lord, Luke records that, "**And Zacharias was troubled when he saw him, and fear gripped him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias'**" (Luke 1:12-13). The angel also told Mary, "**Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God**" (Luke 1:30). Contact with the supernatural angel from the Lord was unnerving. Maybe we have come to feel too cozy with the Christmas story. Perhaps we ought to be a bit more unnerved when we hear the recounting of when God

visited this planet in the form of an infant who upon reaching mature manhood, would be crucified for the sins of His people.

The shepherds were ordinary men God allowed to experience an extraordinary visitation that night. James S. Stewart asks, "And is there not a world of meaning in the fact that it was very ordinary people, busy about ordinary tasks, whose eyes first saw the coming of the Lord?" Then he answers,

It means, first, that the place of duty, however humble, is the place of vision. And it means, second, that it is men who have kept to the deep, simple pieties of life and have not lost the child heart to whom the gates of the Kingdom most readily open.

To these herdsmen, God first entrusted the *Good News* that a baby had been born nearby during their night vigil, an infant "**Savior who is Christ the Lord**" (Luke 2:11). That Baby lying in an animal feeding trough signaled to them the birth of God's only Messiah (See Romans 10:9-10.).

To these shepherds God first entrusted the gospel message, and it was their vocation that would provide the intimate and pastoral illustration of Jesus' relationship with His followers. He is the *Good Shepherd* who calls and cares for those sheep who "**hear his voice**" (John 10:1-14). And for reason of His call and His care, we need not fear either.