

## **LET US GO NOW AND SEE**

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2024

Let us go and see. The shepherds would be speaking these words before the night was out.

The sun was beginning to set as they gathered the last of the strays and herded the flock towards the pen. The weather was mild that night, with just a slight warm breeze coming in from the east. Finally, the last of the sheep were making their way into the pen; thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three; all accounted for. All were now bedding down. It was time for some quiet conversation before sleep and taking their turns at the watch. Many Jews preferred the hustle and bustle of the city. But not these men. They loved the wide-open pastures, and being enveloped in the dark beauty of the night. As they relaxed, they began to tell stories. Ezra, true to form, got off a good off-color joke which got them all in stitches.

As they gazed into the heavens, they could see the Water Bearer shining high at its zenith and the Queen twinkling brightly to the east. Levi took his turn at the watch while the others slept. On that peaceful night, these men had no idea that their world was about to be dramatically altered. But this cataclysmic event – the birth of a simple ordinary looking peasant child – would rock more than their world, he would alter the future for all of humanity.

As the shepherds slept and watched, the sheep suddenly became restless. They moved about nervously. Levi, the watchman, peered into the darkness, trying to discern what predator might be lurking there, maybe a

wolf or bear. Luke's gospel records what happened: "Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." Levi had no time to wake the others. In an instant they were all alert, jumping to their feet, ready to defend the flock. But their eyes grew wide in astonishment at the sight of what could only be classified as an angel, standing right in front of them. The angel spoke: "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." Their minds were trying to grasp what they were seeing and hearing. They were hearing a message of hope and liberation for all the Jewish people struggling under political and economic oppression.

For their people, after hundreds and hundreds of years of waiting, their messiah, according to this messenger, had finally come. But he came wrapped in strange garb; in bands of cloth and lying in a cattle trough. This made no sense to these men. Everyone knew the messiah would be born to nobility in great power and wealth. This messenger seemed to have it all wrong about the economic and social status of the messiah.

But it was the shepherds who had it wrong. They, along with all the Jews, misunderstood God's plan; misunderstood the status of this child in society, and also the kind of a kingdom he would establish. They were all longing for a return to the glory days of the Davidic Kingdom. But Jesus would one day say that his kingdom was not like this world's system.

What were these shepherds to make of such a confusing angelic message? It didn't fit their religious and political and social constructs. But the Jewish people were not the only ones who struggled to align their expectations with the purpose of this child who was born.

Through all the ages, God's promised Good News would be wrapped in a very unique kind of package. A present that would, sadly, be perceived by the Jewish people, and by much of the western world as well, as less than the Good News that they had expected. As God's planned Good News spread throughout the Greek and Roman world of philosophers and intellectuals and kings and power brokers with all their political and military might, this message brought by way of a peasant messiah, began to resonate less and less with the people. They frequently found ways around the challenging messages Jesus proclaimed. It wasn't unusual for them to modify and adapt and interpret Jesus words in ways that were, more fitting to their reality and expectations.

It was because of these subtle modifications and tweaks to the message, that the Roman Emperor Constantine was able to accept Christianity and make this faith the state religion. Thereby aligning Christianity with privilege and power. So, you could say that many believers in the west had traded in the rough swaddling clothes and cattle trough for privilege and a palace.

Now, let me get back to those shepherds still out there in the fields. We last saw them confused about this newborn king. Despite their uncertainty and confusion, they had decided on a course of action. Here is how The Message Bible records what happened next: "the shepherders talked it over. 'Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has

revealed to us.' They left, running.'" As I thought about them running to Bethlehem, it got me wondering what ever happened to their helpless sheep, still sleep-deprived and nervous in their pen. Did they abandon them? Did they draw straws to decide who would be the unfortunate one to be left behind? Well, we'll never know. But what we do know, is that at least most of those shepherds abandoned their post and their job and the little income they would receive to hightail it to Bethlehem. Nothing was going to keep them from seeing this miracle child, the one who had long ago been foretold.

When they eventually found Mary and Joseph and the baby in the manger, we are told this: "After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished." There have been many paintings produced depicting this stable scene. Some paint Mary and Joseph and Jesus in a cave, others in what looks like a barn. In these paintings, Mary and Joseph would almost always look airbrushed, clean, with an angelic smile on their faces. A heavenly glow would surround them, and they would all have halos visible behind their heads.

This would have made it easy for the shepherds to find them. But this is not what they saw. When I picture this scene, here is what I imagine. I hear lowing and bleating and clucking and the city noise outside. I see animal droppings in this corner and that. I see a couple; the young teenage girl and an older man reclining on the straw. They look disheveled, sweaty, dirty, and exhausted. But they appear happy, and yet, they seem to carry a worried look on their faces. As if the weight of the whole world weighs on them, which I believe it did. The baby Jesus is bawling in Mary's arms as she

tries to comfort him – So much for “No crying he makes!” This was, I believe, more like what greeted the shepherds when they arrived that night.

I wonder how the shepherds found this family in the town of Bethlehem. Did they ask around for anyone who had seen a couple with a newborn child? When they finally found their way to the stable and looked inside, they didn't see what they had expected. They looked at the scene before them, and quickly thought, nope, this isn't the messiah's family, and then moved on down the path to look elsewhere – before eventually returning again to this stable.

You see, one must have eyes to see the holy in the ordinary. Just like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem about blackberries, this lowly simple stable, was crammed with heaven, and every individual within; the cow and donkey and Mary, and Joseph, and Jesus, were afire with God. But only those who have eyes to see will take off their shoes and kneel in adoration. I believe those simple peasant shepherds were the ones, the first ones to see this holy mystery clothed in the ordinary. And so, they took off their sandals and knelt to worship.

Because of their altered spiritual vision, they went out to tell everyone whose path they crossed, of this miraculous, holy, unexpected Good News. May you and I as well, have eyes to see, especially during this holy time of year.