

Bethlehem

Act Two

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night.

Luke 2:8

IF THE MAGI REPRESENT THE DISTINGUISHED IN SOCIETY, the prominent and powerful, then the shepherds represent all the rest of us. If the wise men stand in for all the kings and presidents and prime ministers of the world, then the shepherds stand in for the brick layers, the farmers, the shopkeepers on main street. And if the magi displayed uncommon foresight and faith, then it is the shepherds who displayed uncommon understanding and willingness to believe.

As I set into place the figurines of the old man in his scruffy garb, and the young boy with the lamb cradled about his neck, I try to put myself in their shoes. I try to imagine what it must have been like to witness such a glorious, supernatural event.

And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.

Luke 2:9

I have been out in the desert on quiet, star-filled nights, where the only sound is the roar of silence rushing in the ears—where the canopy of stars stretches grandly, in a seamless arc from horizon to horizon against the utter blackness of the night sky.

And I try to imagine what it would be like to have that peaceful stillness shattered by an angelic messenger bathed in heavenly light. Certainly “terrified” is a word that comes to mind. What if that splendid messenger then said to me



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"Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Luke 2:10-12

and was then joined by a veritable sky-full of his kind, loudly praising God with voices in chorus.

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

Luke 2:13-14

What would I do? If I were still conscious, what would I do?

Once the light returned to the blackness of the night sky, and the grand chorus was replaced by silence, I imagine I might attribute the whole affair to a bad dream, or maybe bad beans in the evening meal. At the least I would discount the astounding words I had just heard, passing them off as illusion, or the visage of madness.



Every day the Lord brings wonder and grace to our lives. Perhaps it is in the beauty of the sunrise that welcomes us out of our slumber. Perhaps it is in the faces of those who share our kitchen table at breakfast. Perhaps it is in the quiet joy we experience even in troublesome times.

Do we blithely accept all these as simply ordinary components of an unremarkable life? Are they too common to regard with anything more than passing boredom?

Or do we see in them the wonder and grandeur of a God who stoops below His station to weave Himself into our lives? Do we see God in the sunrise? Do we see Him in the binding love of our family? Do we feel Him

when there is unexpected peace in our heart?

Does "the glory of the Lord" no longer take our breath away? Have we stopped taking Him at His word? When He speaks—either through the miraculous or the mundane—do we listen, and believe?



These common shepherds—plain folk, simple and true—were frightened by the display of God's wonder. But their fright did not stand in the way of their belief. They understood the messengers and their words for what they were. They believed the words, trusting the source without question or doubt.

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.

Luke 2:15-16

The shepherds understood precisely what the angel had told them. They understood the importance of his announcement.

And they believed.
Smart people, those shepherds.



*And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing;
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing.*

Edmund H. Sears

