



8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (Luke 2:8-14)

In the cynical world in which we live, it is almost inconceivable such a vision could have been seen absent photographic techniques that only simulate reality – the skies were first lighted by a warm and glorious light of the Angel of the Lord followed by a host of unnumbered multitudes of angels filling the skies with light and singing praises together of the Father's Good Will to the children of men by the gift of His own only Begotten Son.

Imagine the king's counselors and elders in Jerusalem who not only cared nothing about the fulfillment of prophecy, but actually were so opposed to it that they would take Draconian steps to intercede against their fulfillment, but in vain. The Angel of the Lord did not appear to these cloistered elites of Jerusalem, but to poor men whose job it was to keep watch at all hours over the sheep that had been entrusted to them. 8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. These were men of simple minds – even child-like ways – that the world might brand as ignorant and of low estate, but see how differently does heaven view the value of men. The proud are the lowest of all men, and the humble are lifted up in highest regard by God the Father. ***"The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the LORD of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low."*** (Isaiah 2:11-12)

This hymn-carol contains the actual words of a hymn from Heaven itself! (Gloria in Excelsis Deo - ***Glory to God in the highest:*** Luke 2:14). So it can be convincingly asserted this is the oldest of all hymns in the Hymnal! Its composition is anonymous

further alluding to the touch of divine inspiration. Much of its wording seems to have been inspired by the same class of men to whom the Angel's greeting came that dark night over the hills of Bethlehem - shepherds. In the hills of southern France, it became a Christmas Eve tradition for shepherds to call to one another from hill to hill, "Gloria in Excelsis Deo!" From that folk song of the Bible and of France - ("*Les anges dans nos campagnes*") arose the appending words of the hymn. It was a commonly sung hymn in England in 1816. It is most commonly and traditionally sung to the tune, *Gloria*.

Angels we have heard on high

Angels we have heard on high
Sweetly singing o'er the plains,
And the mountains in reply
Echoing their joyous strains.

Refrain

Gloria, in excelsis Deo!

Gloria, in excelsis Deo!

Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be
Which inspire your heavenly song?

Refrain

Come to Bethlehem and see
Christ whose birth the angels sing;
Come, adore on bended knee,
Christ the Lord, the newborn King.

Refrain

See Him in a manger laid,
Whom the choirs of angels praise;
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid,
While our hearts in love we raise.

Refrain

A God-fearing and compassionate people are able to place themselves in the shoes of others to experience the common pains and sufferings of life, but also the joys and glories of divine experiences. It should be no great leap for us to place ourselves in the sandals of those lonely shepherds "keeping watch over their flocks at night" over Bethlehem. They perhaps remarked to one another regarding the cold of the night and the pristine and cloudless sky from which the stars glittered with particular clarity and beauty that night as they warmed themselves around the watch-fires. The light of those watch-fires kept the wolves at bay just as that coming Light of Christ would keep at bay the wolves and lions of the Evil One. They discussed their families and special loved ones - how they missed them tonight, and what feasts their families would prepare for the coming Sabbath. But these poor men were at their duty stations tonight on the cold hills of Bethlehem. Herod, doubtlessly, was either sound asleep, or hopelessly drunk in opulent surroundings. But the Angel did not appear to Herod or his counselors, but to these humble and poor shepherds. God seldom comes with Pomp and Circumstance, but in the gentle smiles and whispers of the humble at heart.

"Angels we have heard on high, Sweetly singing o'er the plains, And the mountains in reply, Echoing their joyous strains." If we have read the glorious account

given by Luke of the message the Angels bore that night, then we, too, have heard the Angels' voices. We share in the drama of Christmas long past in the haze and dew of the centuries - but, alas, it is still a fresh and timely message. The voice of the Great Angel, followed by the chorus of the heavenly host of angels, harmonized with lilting beauty across the hills and plains of a dark and despondent land. It is so today. Not many will hear or see, because they choose, rather, to sleep and to ignore. But even the great mountains send back the glorious message in echo. Did you not know that LOVE is an echo? Unrequited love ceases to be love. Why do we love the Lord? Because He first loved us. (1 John 4:19) The unrequited love of God becomes JUSTICE! That which is given must be reciprocated. So our hearts echo that refrain of the Angel voices.

"Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong? What the gladsome tidings be, Which inspire your heavenly song?" Shepherds have been singing that heavenly song ever since that night on those great, lone hills of Bethlehem. The world cannot comprehend the joy of poor souls who have known the mystery of God no more than the darkness can comprehend the light, but must flee from it. The shepherds never keep secrets, and why should they? Do they know state secrets that can topple kings? You say no way! Yes, way! The mystery revealed to the shepherds has toppled more kings than all of the armies of Persia, of Greece, of Rome, and of Napoleon combined. It overthrows those powers without violence, but with love and hope. The world may wonder at the joy of some apparently poor and outcast soul, but not so much so as to actually inquire of the profundity of joy that lays hidden in their hearts. Whether rich or poor, the Christian bears a joy and hope that the world cannot, and will not, understand. But the Christian, like the shepherds, must not conceal secrets of love in their hearts. They must go and find Christ; and, once found, they must proclaim their finding to all the world.

"Come to Bethlehem and see, Christ whose birth the angels sing; Come, adore on bended knee, Christ the Lord, the newborn King." There are some messages of such profound delight that they cannot be simply spoken, but must be sung. We must all go DOWN on bended knee to Bethlehem and see this wondrous Gift of God the Father to those who will receive the Gift. The Baby Jesus was given three gifts by the Wise Men to symbolize the prophetic utterances of centuries past - Gold, and Frankincense, and Myrrh - all of great value! Gold symbolized His Sovereignty as King. Frankincense symbolizes His Godhead just as the smoke of the incense burned at altar symbolized the prayers of the people rising to God. He was to be worshipped. He was Emmanuel (God with us.) Myrrh was an expensive oil used for anointing the dead. It was quite rare from across the Persian Gulf. It was prophetic of the sacrificial and atoning death of Christ yet to come in the fullness of time. You can see that God makes every necessary preparation.

"See Him in a manger laid, Whom the choirs of angels praise; Mary, Joseph, lend your aid, While our hearts in love we raise." In order to discover the front and rear of a fish, we need to see its head and tail. In order to know Christ, we need to know from whence He came, How He lived, and where He ascended. If we forget from whence we, ourselves, have come, how can we know where we are bound for? We must see Jesus in the manger of rough-hewn wood - a manger fit for the feeding of animals. We must know, too, that if Jesus is placed in a vessel for the feeding of animals, we must be given such a mighty grace as to feed upon Him. We must know that he was a carpenter - the supposed son of a carpenter- but truly the Son of God. We must know that He was baptized by John in a common little river called Jordan. We must know that He was without sin and full of love and mercy. We must know that in the end of His earthly ministry, He was laid upon that same rough-hewn wood to die, just as He was born, as

a propitiation for our sins. So come and see Him laid in a MANGER - not a silken bed in a king's palace. The only means by which our hearts can be lifted is in LOVE.

Truly, let us sing with lifted hearts and voices together in chorus just as the Angels did 2,000 years ago: "*Gloria, in excelsis Deo! Gloria, in excelsis Deo!*" If the powers of Heaven rejoiced so at the birth of Christ, why do we not do so being made so much lower than they?