



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)

I have never wearied of reading these memorable words from Luke and those preceding 7 verses of the same chapter. They are filled with such beauty and imagery that the literary skills of no man can add to their descriptive proclamations of glorious exultation. It is this night of darkness for which the world has waited from the dark days of the exile from the lush Garden of Eden. Now was the moment when that promise made of old would be fulfilled. The first news of the birth of Jesus was not made through the diplomatic channels of the world powers, but rather to poor and lonely shepherds on a hill outside Bethlehem. These were the only ones who were busy in their labors that night of all who dwelled in that sleepy little hamlet.

Silent night has always been my very favorite Christmas carol, until I sing another such as this one that we address this glorious Christmas Day. Last night may have been the most blessed Christmas Eve I have ever celebrated. I have always loved the warmth, love, and carols of Christmas Eve Service, but last night was even more special - why I cannot say - than all others. It seems as the shadows lengthen in my life, I am able to cherish each succeeding Christmas Eve with ever increasing exultation. There were many of my favorite people in all of my life who came to the service - some I have known from the days that I had to lift them to the parallel bars on the playground at the church. They are now mostly grown up and either in college, or embarking on post-graduate studies. I looked at the familiar faces of the children that my wife and I consider our own. (They will always be our children in our eyes) I thought how good God is to give such fine wine at the last, and so much better than that which we once thought best.

We went caroling after service. The night was cold (near freezing) and the rural

skies of south Alabama were so pristine that we could see every bright and gleaming star. I was, as they say in Alabama, "beside myself" with joy. It was obvious that our caroling brought warmth and joy, too, to all of the homes and hearths that the Spirit directed our steps. I looked around at our beautiful young people, the mellow candle light illumining their faces, and discovered that this was yet another happy memory which I would take with me beyond looming banks of Jordan Waters. It was a night like unto any other night. It was Christmas Eve, and it was as unique and special as every other Christmas Eve in my treasure trove of memories. Though we sang Silent Night at every house, the words of O Holy Night was forefront in my mind and seemed to match perfectly the ambience of the night. The words to this glorious hymn were written in the French by Placide Cappeau and translated into the English by John S. Dwight in 1847. The musical score is by Adolphe Adams. This hymn is reputedly the first music ever to be transmitted by radio - and rightly so since there was never an event as momentous as that night in Bethlehem.

### O HOLY NIGHT

Oh, holy night, the stars are brightly shining;  
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth!  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope, the weary soul rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.  
Fall on your knees, oh, hear the angel voices!  
Oh, night divine, oh, night when Christ was born!  
Oh, night divine, oh, night, oh, night divine!

Led by the light of faith serenely beaming,  
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.  
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,  
Here came the wise men from Orient land.  
The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,  
In all our trials born to be our Friend!  
He knows our need—to our weakness is no stranger.  
Behold your King; before Him lowly bend!  
Behold your King; before Him lowly bend!

Truly He taught us to love one another;  
His law is love and His Gospel is peace.  
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother,  
And in His Name all oppression shall cease.  
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,  
Let all within us praise His holy Name!  
Christ is the Lord! Oh, praise His name forever!  
His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim!  
His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim!

Having lived in the Middle East for more than five years in my younger years, I can tell you that there are no brighter stars to be seen anywhere in the world than in those purple canopied skies of pristine desert air. "*O holy night, the stars are brightly shining;*" and why should they not brightly shine? Even the Holy Stars sing together at such a glorious event! It is the night spoken of by the prophets to be the very moment of

the division of time and eternity. All before Christ is the Eternity Past; and all after is the Eternity Future. We even base our calendar computations on that momentous event! "It is the night of the dear Savior's birth!" Just as God began His Creation in darkness (the evening and the morning were the first day) so did His plan of redemption begin in the darkness of the centuries of Law and Justice. Now, the hope of man, who could not save Himself through perfect obedience, be granted an inconceivably great mercy and grace through a Child born who would, Himself, be that Lamb of Sacrifice of which Father Abraham spoke at the foot of Mt. Moriah with his own beloved son, Isaac. "And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together." (Gen 22:7-8)

The cold, dark night of the centuries was about to be punctuated by resplendent, penetrating LIGHT! "Long lay the world in sin and error pining, Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined." (Isaiah 9:2) Because of Christ, though we may ". . . walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (Psalms 23:4) death has become only a harmless shadow and without any real substance. The real image has been conquered, finally and completely, by our Lord for us! Have you considered the value of a single soul to God? It is of unmentionable worth - so much so that He gave His only Begotten Son to purchase it.

"A thrill of hope, the weary soul rejoices, For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn. Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices! O night divine, O night when Christ was born! O night, O holy night, O night divine!" Yes, God began the old Creation in darkness and completed it in brilliant light of day. So He does with the New Creation which is the complement of the old. A new and glorious dawn of salvation has broken on the morning sky of the soul. Let us fall on our knees just as did those ancient shepherds on the lonely hill overlooking Bethlehem. We have heard the same Angel voices for we have just read it from God's glorious Word from the Gospel of Luke. Have we believe3d it? If so, respond as did the shepherds. And how did they respond? "And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them." (Luke 2:15-20)

Once the Lord has made known to you the immeasurable benefits made available to you in His dearly beloved Son, how will you respond? Hopefully, you will respond as the shepherds: 1) Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. 2) Hopefully, we will waste no time in our resolve: "And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger." 3) Hopefully, when we have found Jesus, we will proclaim it abroad to all who will hear us: "And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child." 4) Hopefully, like the Woman at Jacobs Well, our testimony will be so convincing as to open the eyes of all who hear: "And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them

by the shepherds." Have we done?

"Led by the light of faith serenely beaming, With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand. So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming, Here came the wise men from Orient land. The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger, In all our trials— born to be our Friend! He knows our need to our weakness is no stranger. Behold your King; before Him lowly bend! Behold your King; before Him lowly bend!" The Wise Men of the East did not sit idly by until the Star of Bethlehem suddenly appeared. They studied the Old Testament prophecies so well they could have repeated them with their eyes closed and, not only that, but they studied the heavens for the promised sign - and they SAW it! We must not take the prophecies and promises of God lightly, but with enthusiastic interest. Our Lord and King was laid in a manger - a trough for feeding the beasts of the field. We, too, were no better than the beasts of the field without Him. That crude manger held the King of Kings who would not only come to us at first in such a bed, but would be held on another crude wooden instrument of torture in His redemptive and sacrificial death for us. It would be far more advisable to bend the knee to our Sovereign now, then to do so only after He comes as our Judge.

"Truly He taught us to love one another; His law is love and His Gospel is peace. Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother And in His Name all oppression shall cease. Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we, Let all within us praise His holy Name! Christ is the Lord! O praise His name forever! His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim! His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim!" His Higher Law is not written on Tables of Stone. "Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle (written letter) of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart." (2 Cor 3:3) His two great Commandments serve as the Keystone and Chief Cornerstone of His Law. Absent LOVE, there can be no obedience to God for LOVE is the component from which all other commandments are suspended. If we have life and lips, we must employ them in praising His glorious Name. How many of us who profess to be Christian do so?

A very Merry Christmas today and all remaining days of Christmastide.