



¹ Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, ² Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. (Matt 2:1-2)

There was a pristine brilliance to the purple nighttime canopy overlooking the hill country of the high desert surrounding Jerusalem that first Christmas more than two thousand years ago (in fact 2,015 AD). The drama of the night was imperceptible to all who may have been awake for some unusual reason - for most were cozily wrapped in their blankets and sleeping amidst the most astonishing event to ever happen in time and eternity - the birth of the promised Savior! It was so profound that our calendars base their computations from before, and after, that eventful night.

Unnoticed by the bustling residence of Bethlehem earlier in the evening, two very weary travelers arrived from Nazareth - a woman, Mary, about to give birth to a Child, and her espoused husband, Joseph. There was nothing of note to draw attention to these two humble travelers. The woman was riding a donkey, and had so ridden that donkey for a journey of seventy-two miles. They were desperately seeking lodging for the woman was about to deliver a baby! Checking every available inn of the village, the answer was the same at all of them: "No, we have no room for you. Can't you see the place is filled up with visitors!"

Joseph was a good husband who loved his wife dearly. Finally, in desperation, he asked of the innkeeper if there was any place he and his wife could bed down apart from the inn. "Well, yes, there is the stable in the back of the inn, but, mind you, it is full of beasts of the field." "I'll take it!" responded Joseph¹.

It was not at all out of character for baby Jesus to be born under such circumstances. The greater part of the world would reject His love and His sacrifice for them; and so it began even before He was born that night. Just as is true in the hearts of many today, there was no room for Jesus that night.

Based on his observation of his wife, Mary was very near to childbirth. Now was

¹ Given the hygiene standards of the time, the stable was likely considerably cleaner and quieter than the single room "inn" with its myriad of travelers.

no time for quibbling or delay. He must prepare a place among the beasts of burden, cattle, and sheep, from the straw which was strewn about the stable's dirt floor. Sure enough, Joseph had no sooner made a bed as comfortable as possible in that cold stable that Mary went into labor. Sometime in the darkest arc of the night, she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger - it was the only furniture remotely resembling a baby's bed. It was made of roughhewn wood, the lowliest of beds for the King of Glory. There was, curiously, the ugly shadow of a cross that cast its hateful image across that scene in Bethlehem, for thirty three years later, that same Jesus would again be laid upon a rough hewn wooden cross and nailed there. It is an act of mercy and grace that this fate was not told Mary by the great angel, Gabriel.

Oblivious to the profound event taking place in sleepy little Bethlehem, there were shepherds, men of the poorest class, on the hillsides overlooking Bethlehem abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks. It is quite an amazing 'coincidence' that Jesus, the Passover Lamb of God, would be born in Bethlehem since Bethlehem was a place for raising sacrificial lambs for the sacrifice in the Temple of Jerusalem on Passover.

The shepherds, those that were awake at least, made small talk about the cold night air (it often snows on the high desert of Bethlehem, and perhaps remarked about the beauty and clarity of the night sky. I can attest to that beauty having lived on the high deserts of the Middle East for many years. No one was mindful of the shepherds, and the shepherds were not mindful of the sleeping villages. They were mindful of only one thing - their sheep whose feeding and security they would have risked their lives to provide. It is a bit like the Good Shepherd of John 10:11: *I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.*

Suddenly, the solitude of the hills were over taken by a wonderful glow and Presence. The shepherds knew not what to make of such a brilliance of light in its sudden appearance. *lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid..* (Luke 2:9-10 KJV) Yes, and you would be afraid, too, if a brilliant light suddenly emanated from Heaven onto a rural hillside. But there was more. There was an angelic Being that accompanied the light's appearance. The simple shepherds must have been terrified. But no matter the drama of light and being, when God is its source, there is no cause for fear to the innocent. God always puts His people at ease at His appearance. *And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.* The shepherds were astonished at this news - great joy to ALL people! That must mean even we shepherds - and it DID!

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. (Luke 2:11-12)

Is this the Christ of which Abraham and the prophets spoke, wondered the shepherds? Yes, for it is He alone that can Save the world! The Angel of the Lord told them where they would find the child. Now comes a confirming appearance of heavenly grace: *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.* (Luke 2:13-14) Such rapturous beauty the shepherds had never before seen or even imagined! This child must be most majestic to be heralded even by the heavenly host of angels - and He is!

When we have confronted messengers from heaven itself, how should we then respond? We respond just as did the shepherds: *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. (Luke 2:15 KJV) They resolved to go immediately to see baby Jesus. Now it is one thing to make a resolution, and another to see it through. These shepherds were not remiss in seeing it through. They not only responded, they did so with HASTE! And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. (Luke 2:16)

These poor men of the field were the first visitors, by royal invitation, to see the baby Jesus! How should we behave once we have found Christ? I believe we should react just as the shepherds did: *And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. (Luke 2:17)* Can the blind whose sight is restored refrain from shouting out the good news to all in earshot? Can the leper, separately from loved ones and polite society, withhold his praise once Christ has touched his debilitating soul? Can a lost sinner, coming into the presence of Christ, healed and restored, not bleat out to all the good tidings? Neither could these poor shepherds hold their peace regarding the events of Christ's birth. They published the news to all who would hear them both near and far. Do we do as well as they?

When we hear the good news of Christ, how do we respond? Perhaps we respond in the correct manner as did those who heard and believed the shepherds. *And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. (Luke 2:18)* I might add here that the term 'wondered' does not in any wise mean to doubt or question, but it means to be amazed or astonished. Can you imagine the credibility of poor shepherds having such an impact on others? It was not the poor shepherds whose credibility gleamed through, but the Word of God gave veracity to their newfound faith.

On this very night, there were also Wise Men traversing field and mountain at a great distance away - perhaps they had not yet crossed the Zagros Mountain range of western Persia. It would take months for them to arrive, but they would come in time to find Jesus in a house in Bethlehem. So the Jewish shepherds were joined by the Gentiles from Persia in attending upon the newborn king - *to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.*

Merry Christmas

2,000 years later, it is STILL Christmas!