



*And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.* (Luke 2:8)

It is of particular comfort to realize that God is no respecter of persons - that is, He does not show preference to those of wealth, high position, or of popular esteem. Not far away from Bethlehem was the King's palace in Jerusalem, but the birth of Christ was not proclaimed to those of royalty there. Though the Jewish scholars knew of the prophecies of Christ's coming, they did not have the oil of the Holy Spirit to connect the dots. Their hearts remained as dark as the hills overlooking Bethlehem that night - until those hills were bathed in the warm and brilliant glow of angelic presence.

The secular power of Rome was engaged, unwittingly, to bring the mother of Baby Jesus to Bethlehem along with her husband, Joseph, for the purpose of registering for taxation. *And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:;) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.* (Luke 2:1-5) The Bible comments, quite matter-of-factly, *And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.* (Luke 2:6-7)

Of course, it is useless to wonder what would have happened if the Emperor of Rome had not set into motion the terms by which Mary would come to Bethlehem where her boy-child was prophesied to be born. When God has ordained it, there is no other manner by which Jesus could have been born. His birth was precisely according to the decree of the Councils of Heaven - and no power on earth will intervene, but every necessary earthly power to facilitate that prophecy will be brought to bear. Certainly, there was no room for Jesus at the Inn, nor was there room for Him in the hearts of the world at large. *For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we*

*esteemed him not.* (Isaiah 53:2-3) Though our Lord was shunned by the society of men, He was welcome to share the lodging of the brut beasts of the field. In that instant, the brut beast were more privileged than man at large.

It was undoubtedly quite cold that December night on the highlands of Bethlehem as was customary for the season. The lowing of cattle, and the bleating and baaing of sheep made the scene so peaceful and natural - unaffected by the discordant sounds of man. It may have seemed lonely, but it was a warm kind of loneliness that Mary, the baby Jesus, and Joseph enjoyed there in the stable. It is true that often the most austere of lodgings are made most luxurious by the circumstances that have brought them into being. Mary was, without doubt, exhausted after traveling three days on the back of a donkey - being pregnant and about to bear her Son. Joseph, too, was weary from the long and difficult journey over unfriendly terrain. But baby Jesus was kept warm as He cuddled in his swaddling clothes (a custom still observed for newborns in the Middle East). Mary loved her baby Boy with an inexpressible love, but she was only the second person to love Jesus. The first was God the Father. The love that the Father vested in His only Begotten Son defies description. But the love that compelled God to send that beloved Son to die for you and me also defies description even to a greater degree.

You may argue that God cannot be 'compelled' to any act, but not so! Love is the overruling nature of God our Father. It is as natural as the Law of Gravity for Him to be compelled by love to make provision for our redemption - because He loved us before we ever knew Him, or were even conceived in our mother's womb.

So baby Jesus was laid in a rough wooden manger - a trough for feeding sheep and cattle. He was the Bread of Life and of Heaven; so it seems natural that He should be placed in a vessel for the feeding of sheep which sheep you and I are! That rough wooden manger would prefigure that rough cross of wood upon which our Lord would be crucified thirty three years hence. *But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour.* (2 Tim 2:20) So the first nursery room of Jesus was one of animals feeding about Him. And the last He saw ere He gave up the ghost at Calvary was a scene of brute beasts ridiculing and hurling insults at the Lord of Glory. Should we not weep to consider it!

This was the very time appointed by God the Father for God the Son to be incarnated and born in quiet, humble little Bethlehem. Bethlehem, too, though small, has significance. It was the city of David, and the place of burial of Rachel, the favored wife of Jacob. The district is called Ramah! The same in which Herod, the wicked, had all boy children of two years age and under martyred in an attempt to destroy the Son of God. *Thus saith the LORD; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not.* (Jer 31:15 & Matt 2:18)

The name, Bethlehem-Judah, means (in the Hebrew) 'House of Bread and Praise.' Christ is our Bread, and it is Him to whom all praise is due. The little mountain hamlet was also a place for the breeding of sacrificial lambs which were sold to travelers in route to the Temple at Jerusalem for the Passover offering. How appropriate that the our Lord - the central Being of the Passover, and Lamb of God - should be born in the same little village! *Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.* (1 Cor 5:7)

So now we shall turn to address those first visitors who came to see the baby Jesus by special invitation of a host of Angels on high. They must have been very important persons, were they not? They must have been men of renown and high learning, were they not? They must have been men dignified by the praise and salutations of their neighbors such as are avidly sought after by large and ambitious churches, were they not? No, they were NOT! They were of the common and mean variety of working men whose minds had little time to defraud neighbor or stranger. They were of the lowest class of men - shepherds - just as our Lord came to be - the Good Shepherd who would lay down His life for the sheep. *I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.* (John 10:14-15)

The little village lay quiet and peaceful as its inhabitants were fast asleep - all except Mary, and Joseph, and perhaps even baby Jesus, and certainly, the lonely shepherds on the hills overlooking Bethlehem. They kept silent watch over their sheep who depended upon the shepherd for protection and provision as we do upon Christ. They may have chatted quietly, and remarked on the pristine beauty of the starlit sky. Having lived in the region, I can tell you that there are no night skies as beautiful as those in the high deserts of the Middle East. No one was thinking about these poor men. They were simply hired to do a job no one else wanted, and for little pay. No one, except the powers of the King of Heaven - He had these men in the center of His focus. He considered them of sufficient importance as to send an angelic host to inform them of the momentous event for which the centuries had longed to see - and they saw it! *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. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 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. 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 2:9-14) Thusly was the first Advent of Christ. Those who should have known with certainty of His coming did not, and those who were regarded as unworthy were the very ones who did see it!

Perhaps that first Advent will be very like the second. It may be the great theologians and famous TV evangelist will go unaware of His coming. Perhaps they will be the ones left in the field, and the beggar beside, taken at His coming. So, how did the shepherds respond to the Heavenly message? Did they sigh and wonder about it, or question the validity (in nasalized Oxford accents or in the Greek) of the message? No! They ACTED on the news given - *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.* (Luke 2:15-16) These men were not 'educated' theologically enough to question the Word of God as do many in our modern churches and seminaries. They immediately resolved to go and see this great sight. They had been given a Holy invitation which they did not question. So have we! Do we question His Word? Neither did they go casually, but *made haste*. Those who seek shall surely find, and they did so!

These poor men found Mary, Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. When we find Christ to be the Redeemer of our souls, what is our response? What was the response of the shepherds? Why, they spread the Gospel without hesitation! *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.*

(Luke 2:17-18) When men and women (the woman at Jacob's Well) find Christ, they are empowered with authenticity and credibility. All of the well-to-do people believed these poor shepherds - not because they were poor shepherds, but of what truth their testimony demonstrated!

When we have been to the mountaintop of blessing, we cannot linger there forever, for there remains work to be done in the valley. We must share the message, but we must also bear the testimony in our daily lives. That is what the shepherds did! *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 2:20)

At this Advent Season, my heart is touched by the love that God the Father demonstrated in sending His well-beloved Son to die an atoning death for our sins (while we were yet enemies of God) so that we might become One with Christ, and thereby One with God the Father. We might even say that to 'atone' means to be made AT-ONE with God - One Mind, One Will, One Purpose, and One Spirit. I not only love my Lord, but I also love all who read this devotion. We are all related as blood-relatives in Christ, and we are brothers and sisters in Him.

The following poem I wrote long ago for the Advent Season, but it is just as surely relevant at all seasons, because all seasons are seasons of the Lord:

**Voyage of the Star Seekers**  
from Logos of St Andrew Winter 99

*Across the desert plains they came,  
By wise men gifts were Borne,  
From distant eastern lands of Fame,  
They journeyed on with Light adorned.*

*They sought for news at Herod's throne,  
But no such word was heard -  
Of king or priest it was not known -  
The STAR foretold HIS Birth!*

*The STAR stopped over Bethlehem,  
A stable yard the Scene.  
A manger held the precious One.  
The cold, night air was keen.*

*The gifts of Frankincense and Myrrh  
and Gold were offered then.  
The stable yard was all Astir  
With beasts, and Love and Men.*

*So strange in royal palace grand  
No Christ child was revealed;  
But then in Ramah's humble sand  
The eastern kings had Kneeled.*

*The ages since are lost in Time,  
But time no burdens cast  
Upon the minds of all Mankind -  
The STAR outshines the Past!*