

Day 4: While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks

Dec. 1

*1 While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
all seated on the ground,
an angel of the Lord came down,
and glory shone around.*

*2 “Fear not,” said he for mighty dread
had seized their troubled mind
“glad tidings of great joy I bring
to you and all mankind.*

*3 “To you, in David’s town, this day
is born of David’s line
a Savior, who is Christ the Lord;
and this shall be the sign:*

*4 “The heavenly babe you there shall find
to human view displayed,
all simply wrapped in swaddling clothes
and in a manger laid.”*

*5 Thus spoke the angel. Suddenly
appeared a shining throng
of angels praising God, who thus
addressed their joyful song:*

*6 “All glory be to God on high,
and to the earth be peace;
to those on whom his favor rests
goodwill shall never cease.”*

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. (Luke 2:10)

Nahum Tate was the poet laureate of England when he penned the Christmas hymn, *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks*. It was, in many ways, highly exemplary of his work. Here, he paraphrase Luke 2 in rhyming verse. This was his standard practice; he adapted poems and plays that other people had previously written. Only in this case alone, his efforts have lasted more than three centuries.

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks is normally (though not exclusively) sung to a tune composed by the great George F. Handel, which originally was included in one of his operas. Think about it this way: *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks* has the highest of pedigrees: its text by the poet laureate of England set to music by that country’s greatest composer.

The scene opens in the shepherds’ fields surrounding the small town of Bethlehem.

Mighty, supernatural beings (angels) have gathered in this unlikely place to deliver a mighty message to men “seated on the ground,” who “watched their flocks by night.” The contrast could not be greater. Mere men, and lowly ones at that, are confronted by the very angels of God. Significantly, the first words out of the mouth of the angel spokesman were, “Fear not,” exactly what Luke 2:10 reports of the original conversation. Tate conjectures why the angel needed to tell the humble shepherds not to be afraid. He writes: “For mighty dread had seized their troubled mind.”

Because most of us have read the Christmas story so many times over, it can lose its punch. But imagine yourself just “hanging out” with some friends in your backyard one evening when, all of a sudden, a tremendous light shines around you, so bright that it makes the skies clearer than you have seen in the brightest noontime sun. And then, a supernatural being appears, more beautiful than anything or anyone you have ever seen. Not an apparition, you know beyond the shadow of a doubt that this is an actual supernatural being – not some emoji created for your phone. He is huge, you are small. He is obviously powerful, you ... not so much. He has the unbelievable ability to make himself suddenly present and visible to you.

Who wouldn’t feel unimaginably small? Everything in your life up to this moment seems, well, sorted, but mostly just petty and pointless. And in your head swirl thousands of questions, “Why me? What could this possibly mean? What happens to me now, is this the end? I’m gonna die now, right? How mighty, how beautiful and, yes, how *holy* is this one who confronts me!”

Almost always in Scripture, the first two words out of the mouth of an angel are, “Fear not!” It is only after the altogether reasonable shock has eased that we can hear the message. And what a message it is: “To you, in David’s town, this day is born of David’s line a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (verse 3). This is *the* message – more powerful than the supernatural messengers who deliver it. A Savior has come! For *you!* This is what we must never grow immune to, no matter how many times we hear it.

We too should join in the angels’ song: “All glory be to God on high, and to the earth be peace; to those on whom his favor rests goodwill shall never cease” (verse 6).

Questions

1. Have you ever had a “supernatural” experience?
2. How do you think you would respond to the appearance of an angel?
3. What to you is the most amazing part of the Christmas story regarding the shepherds?

Prayer

Jesus, I want to be filled with wonder when I think of the precious things recorded in Scripture. And yet, I confess that much of the time, I am not. Instead, I merely read the words, but ignore the meaning ... and the emotion it brought to the participants ... and once brought to me. Today, I ask you to rekindle the power and majesty and mystery of your coming and its meaning for me, Jesus. Amen.