

The experience the shepherds had the night the angels sang was most awe-inspiring. They were filled with fear... the kind of fear we experience in the presence of the miraculous and supernatural. "...the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid.... And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God...."

Now try to imagine what it was like for them when the angels were gone away from them into heaven. (I imagine at first they listened carefully for the echo of the angel voices... they craned their necks and listened but heard only the sound of the sheep bleating and a dog barking in the distance. I imagine they gazed into the heavens for a fading glimpse of the glory of the Lord but saw only the night time sky and the stars twinkling as they had before. When the angels sang <sup>the shepherds forgot</sup> ~~they had completely forgotten~~ themselves but now they become aware once more of the coldness and the dampness of the night air and the smell of the sheep and fields. I imagine they looked at one another for several moments in silence, awestruck, searching one another's eyes for some understanding of the wonderful things they had seen and heard.

I think that when the angels went away into heaven the shepherds felt the way I feel on the day after Christmas... or the day we take the Christmas tree down and put the angel decorations away for another year.

Each Christmas time I look with great expectations for the Christmas Eve candle-light service, hoping that it will produce within me something of the experience the shepherds had that night when the angels appeared to them. So many of my preparations are aimed at producing that effect. I get out my Christmas records of the Kings College, Cambridge, boyschoir and listen to them in the hopes of hearing a faint echo of the angels singing.

We decorate our Christmas trees with bright-colored lights, place brightly colored packages around the foot of the tree, and place a Christmas angel on the top... perhaps with the hope of re-creating the experience the shepherds had when the glory of the Lord shone round about them. (I have never heard a choir of angels. In fact, I have never even seen an angel, as far as I know. But when the junior choir sings this evening with their angel-like gowns on bathed in the light of candles, I hope to catch a glimpse of what it was like for the shepherds when they heard the angelic hosts.)

(When I was a little boy I would lay awake on Christmas Eve, waiting impatiently for the first light of day, listening intently for the sound of Santa Claus with his sleigh and eight tiny rein-deer landing on the roof of our house. I was awe-struck on Christmas morning to come down the stairs and see all the shiny presents that had appeared over night as if by magic. All these things produced in me a sense of awe and wonder the likes of which the shepherds must have felt on that first Christmas Eve.

But what happens when the excitement of Christmas is over? I don't know about you, but after all the gifts are opened on Christmas morning and all the surprises have been revealed I look anxiously at my watch to see what time it is. I feel that time is slipping away. The morning has gone so quickly. I feel a twinge of sadness as the thrill slips from my grasp. The enchantment of Christmas morning is slipping away.

The day after Christmas is nearly back to normal. Many of us will be back to work. The radio suddenly stops playing Christmas music and we begin to hear the sounds of the year's top ten popular records. A week or two passes and the excitement of new toys wears off, some are broken already. The presents that fit are put away. The tree is

taken down and the Christmas decorations along with the Christmas angel go back to the attic for another year. All that is left of Christmas is the pine needles on the floor that I have to clean up.)

There is a twinge of sadness when Christmas is over. I wonder if that's how the shepherds felt when the angels went away into heaven and they found themselves where they were before... out in the fields, doing their work, keeping watch over their flocks. But our Scripture Lesson tells us that it wasn't until after the angels were gone away that they found Jesus. "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 into Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known to us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger."

As I think about this story I ask myself, which sight was more awe-inspiring for these shepherds? The angels or the baby? Since our son, Andrew, was born I know how awe-inspiring a baby can be, but the smell of dirty diapers and having to get up in the middle of the night to feed him helps to break that spell of enchantment. So how disappointed the shepherds must have been initially as they came to find

their saviour and Lord. Compared with the glory that shone around the angels they found this baby in a manger to be rather tawdry. There ~~was no glory there in the barn...~~ <sup>were no angel choirs</sup> only the smell of hay and cattle... ~~no angel-choirs...~~ only the sound of cattle lowing. But the shepherds found Jesus there in the rather uninspiring surrounding of a barn... not in the awe-inspiring beauty of the angels... but in a barn to which they had been directed by the angels.

There is something extremely important in this story for us today. The shepherds found Jesus only when the angels went away. (And we will discover the real meaning of Christmas only in the emotional vacuum that follows its celebration.) The angels were important <sup>only</sup> because they told the shepherds where Jesus could be found. And all our Christmas preparations and celebrations have value only if they point us to where we will find Jesus.

(Tonight, when we enter this candle-lit sanctuary, hear the choir, sing the old familiar carols, and listen to the Christmas story I hope we will all experience something of the wonder those shepherds felt in the presence of the angels. But I hope that it will also point you to Jesus and where he is found today in your lives.

The real meaning of Christmas is found only when we come back down to earth after the holidays are over. It is then we begin to understand that on the first Christmas God entered our weary, work-a-day world... a world that is so often uninspiring and filled with routine duties and a lot of drudgery... a world in which we so rarely catch a glimpse of the glory of the Lord or see angels. In fact from the time Jesus was born in a stable until he was 30 years old, his life was so ordinary and insignificant, like mine and most of yours, that the gospel writers tell us next to nothing about him.

Think of that after the last present is opened and when Christmas day draws to a close. Think of that when you feel the enchantment of Christmas giving way to the cares and responsibilities of the world and your work. Think of that when you take down the tree in a few weeks and put the Christmas angels away. Jesus was found by the shepherds in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes. And today Jesus is found in the ordinariness of our every day lives. Have you found him there?

Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, left the realms of endless day where he was surrounded by worshipping angels and he came into a stable to be worshipped by scruffy

shepherds. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. That is the meaning of Christmas, Jesus dwells among us through his Spirit in the ordinariness of our every day lives. On that first Christmas Eve Jesus left the joy and wonder of an eternal holiday in heaven to be born in a stable and die on a cross. The real meaning of Christmas can be found only when the angels go ~~away~~ <sup>home</sup>.

AMEN