

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

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Christmas Eve
Year A

Shepherds and Sheep

For the rest of his life he would remember how cold and dark it had been that night, *keeping watch over the flock*. It had seemed dark and cold all day, in fact. Maybe all week, who knows.... One day was very like another. After all, he'd lived and worked in the same fields with the same shepherds (or their fathers or their uncles) on the same Bethlehem hills for as long as he could remember. He was cold, too, because he was tired and hungry. It had been a long, long day in a long cold winter with those silly sheep. There they were, huddled together, their vacant, woolly faces watching their watchers, the rhythm of their breaths pulsing the air over their heads with little puffs of mist and the soft sounds of their constant restless nudging and butting against one another for some inscrutable idea of perfect place. What inane creatures they were! How would they ever survive without shepherds and their shepherd's crooks to save their foolish bumbling selves and bring them to food and shelter and heal the wounds from their wanderings??

He wondered how long had he had been sitting there, leaning against a rock and staring blankly into the darkness - at the sheep or the sky or the frayed corner of his blanket. It might have been an hour. It might have been a thousand ages. He knew he had finished the last of the stale bread in his pocket, and fallen into thinking about his own foolishness and everything he would never be. His life had seemed as vacant to him that night as the faces and meanderings of his flock - without direction or meaning; yet restless and cornered in a muddy, aimless life where there was neither peace nor passion. Like his sheep. Yes, the woolly company he kept, at least, was fitting enough.

Try as he would, he could never put his finger exactly on when everything had begun to look different that night. It wasn't as if there had been a thundering noise or a flash of lightening or anything like that. Later he wondered: why on earth not? Shining eternity blazing into our mortal time, the whole reality of the universe splitting open to expose the truth about God - the terrifyingly fragile, unimaginable truth of the Word become mortal flesh..... Why wouldn't it come with thunder and lightening? But it wasn't that kind of dazzling at all.

In fact, he thought, it would have been possible to have missed the whole thing. But he didn't and neither did the others who were with him. It was as if they all began to wake up for the first time of their lives - wake up to themselves and to the whole world of creation that was their home. The only way he could ever explain it was that, when they "woke up", everything where they were stayed exactly the same *and* everything was completely changed. They could see and hear things all around them that they'd never known were there before; and yet it was perfectly clear everything had always been just as it was at that moment. And... how could they not have known seen it all before?

The air was full of God! Their old grazing field was awash in wings of light; and there was music all around them, a glorious song of peace, of *shalom*, the wholeness and healing and harmony of all life was ringing in every blade of grass, on every beam of starlight. It seemed to bathe them all with its message, inside and out; the message and

the music were so clear and compassionate and wise. The wisdom in the song called out to them: Hurry! *Make haste!* There is a perfect place for you to be right now, you who are filled with the glory of God. You will know just where to find it; the song will lead you there. There is such a wonderful sign come from heaven, waiting for you. It is the most glorious and blessed sign there could ever be; and it is as ordinary as a *baby born to the poor, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a stable feeding trough.*

They got to the stable so quickly, he and the others. It was as if they had flown, as if they had been carried on those wings of light that filled the air. He'd certainly never seen any of them move like that before – all their cold, clumsy, unshapely limbs were *full of grace and beauty.* They were practically airborne, no longer heavy and awkward, no longer in bondage to the earth.

He remembered that the hay had smelled so sweet to them as they stooped to enter the stable, and that the cattle seemed to be guarding the little family, and warming them with their bodies and their gentle breath. The shepherds all knelt right down before *the child lying in the manger.* They hadn't planned to do that and they didn't check it out with each other. It must have been that glorious, heavenly song that made them so sure what they were meant to do. And when they looked up and saw the exhaustion and worry on the faces of the woman and the man, they knew why the message of the song had brought them here *to make known what had been told them about this child.* So they told them everything they could remember, how the heavenly voices had sung the refrain over and over again, *Do not be afraid; I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. Do not be afraid.*

We could tell those words made a big difference to them, to Mary and to Joseph, the way the relief began to set their faces free. We didn't stay for very long after that, probably only a few minutes the way we're used to telling time, but in our souls it was all the time that ever was or ever will be...

They returned to their old grazing field, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen... When they got there, everything looked exactly the same as it always had, and nothing would ever look the same to any of them again. Because they knew now that the air was really full of God and the joyous, peace-full music of angels' wings.

What had he been thinking when it all began? Yes... He'd been thinking how like he was to his own sheep. And, you know, it was true, wonderfully true. He could see that every one of them – Mary, Joseph, the Innkeeper, the shepherds, the angels, every blade of grass and beam of starlight – all of them had been drawn into the fold of that tiny baby, like sheep. Only the child in the feeding trough had not used a shepherd's crook to call them; he had used music and love and wings of light. And the music and the love and the light would go on and on and on, until every one in all the world was safe in the care of the child, their shepherd.

He would wonder about it all for the rest of his life. You know, it *might* have been nighttime; it *might* have been day. He couldn't remember now and it didn't matter. Anything would have been darkness in that light... What did matter was that when he listened, he could still hear the song in blades of grass, the leaves in the trees, in the gentle lapping of the littlest waves on the shore of the sea; and whenever he did he would know again that every breath he breathed was full of God.

We can too. The child in the feeding trough is calling to us on the same wings of light and love the shepherds knew, with music all around us – the glorious song of peace and good will, the song of *shalom* ringing in every blade of grass, on every beam of starlight:

Do not be afraid; I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a feeding trough – for he means to become the food that will save and heal his flock.

*The Body of Christ, the bread of heaven.
The Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.*