

“Keeping Company with Shepherds”
Reflections on *Angels We Have Heard on High*

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Luke 2.1-20

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Angels and shepherds. We are so used to them being together. Every nativity scene I remember has them hovering together ‘round yon virgin mother and child. That telling of those Christmas events that dwells in my heart, which we just heard, puts them together on a hillside, angels and shepherds. This banner on our sanctuary wall gets it right.

So we might miss how wrong it seemed, angels keeping company with shepherds.

No wonder the shepherds were terrified!

Let’s chase from our minds those domesticated ideas of angels we find in Christmas cards and craft stores. Realize that actually being encountered by one of these messengers from God causes even the most stoutly pious to blanch, quake, and melt. Angels are not safe!

So what chance do shepherds have? Shepherds, who would never be mistaken for anyone great, pious, or good? Let’s chase from our minds our domesticated ideas of shepherds. I imagine they were just as varied as you and I are, but in terms of peoples’ expectations, shepherds were very low. Low, as in untrustworthy. Low, as in marginal. Low, as in we’d step around one if we saw her on a city sidewalk, hand out. Low, as in we’d move away if there were a group of them on a street corner, and it was night.

So that night, when the angel loomed over them, of course those shepherds were “sore afraid.” The word Luke used here, writing in Greek, was *mega*. As in, they were “mega-afraid.”

So, why didn’t they stay that way?

II

After I’m done talking, we’re going to sing another great Christmas carol, *Angels We Have Heard on High*. I love the chorus. As I child, I pictured singing it as falling down the stairs with your voice, and having fun doing it. *Glo-o-o-o-o-O-o-o-o-o-O-o-o-o-o-O-ria*.

Gloria in Excelsis Deo! Latin; it means “Glory to God in the Highest!” God’s glory is God’s fullness, and that’s Who we celebrate!

Open you hymn books to it. It’s number 38.

It’s a French carol, loosely translated into English. You can see the French title at the top, “Les anges dans nos campagnes.” (“Angels in our countryside.”) The song comes from the

southeast of France, where they grow grapes for wine and tend sheep and goats for cheese. The story is that, in olden days, shepherds in the hills on Christmas Eve would sing this chorus across the valleys, and echo it back to each other. *Glo-o-o-o-o-O-o-o-o-o-O-o-o-o-o-O-ria*. It would be beautiful, their joyous strains. Angelic even.

Imagine, mistaking shepherds for angels!

III

Have a look at verse 2. We've left France, and we're back in Bethlehem. Verse 2 has us asking these Bethlehem shepherds questions. Stripping away the poetry of the song, we are basically wondering, "What's with you guys?"

They've come bounding into town. Not whispering — they are shepherds — but boisterous and shouting of jubilee! Jubilee! That's a promise of Scripture, that people will be restored to what they have lost, that justice will be done for those who have been oppressed and impoverished.

People like shepherds.

Jesus would later proclaim:

*God's Spirit is on me;
he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and
recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"*

That's jubilee, for people like shepherds.

Shepherds, why are you singing of jubilee? Of good news, gladsome tidings? That the time of God's blessing has come, *this day*, in David's town? Don't you know people are sleeping? Why are you — you of all people — singing, and not the songs your sort normally sing? (We know about those ones!) Singing such a song of praise: "*Glory to God in the highest!*"?

"Come! Come, and we'll show you! Come with us," shepherds say, *"right into sleepy Bethlehem. Let's disturb the peace with the praise of the Lord! Let's worship, with bodies bowed and love pouring out. Come along, everyone, and let's see together. Come, see the Child. Come, see the Christ, the Messiah, the One promised to rescue God's people.*

¹ Luke 4.18-19 (The Message)

Come, see the King, in whom God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Come, see the Lord, God Almighty!"

IV

For we have seen angels.

Angels, who have filled our mega-fear with mega-joy.

Angels, who have let us in on what God is doing, right now.

Angels, heavenly armies! Our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, and they are winning the battle, not with spears and swords, bullets or bombs, but with praise-songs.

Angels, who sang when God created the heavens and the earth, and who are singing now as God's new creation begins.

We have seen angels, and they've sent us — shepherds like us — to see for ourselves.

Shepherds. Fellowshepherds. Will you walk slowly? Even if your legs don't move so well now, won't your heart race ahead? Will you keep it quiet? Even if you've got no one to listen, won't you join me in praising God? Will you let it be known that God's messengers have kept company with you? Even if you are not certain of what you have seen, will you spread the rumour, echoing their joyous strains.

For to you is born the Saviour, Christ the Lord.

Celebrate, God in the highest!

Gloria, in excelsis Deo!