

Christmas Eve Meditation  
© Lisa C. Farrell, December 24, 2023

A group of children were once asked to write about angels. They came up with some wonderful insights, things to be honest, that I did not know.

- Angels don't eat, but they drink milk from Holy Cows.
- One little boy's guardian angel helps him with science, but he's no good at math.
- There are only two main angels, Hark and Harold.
- Angels work for God. They watch over little kids when God has to go do something else.
- When it gets cold outside, angels fly south for the winter.
- Angels live in cloud houses. These are made by God and His son, who is a really good carpenter.
- When an angel gets angry, he takes a deep breath. Then he counts to ten. When he lets his breath out, there's a tornado somewhere. (That explains a lot.)
- And finally, all angels are girls because the boys didn't want to wear dresses.

God sent angels to shepherds to tell them the good news. We picture an idyllic scene. A quiet countryside and singing angels filling the sky. In our mind we still think of shepherding as it was during the time of King David, a noble enterprise, and the shepherds as faithful servants. But by the time of Jesus, shepherds were more like truckers, migrant workers and illegal immigrants. They were constantly on the move. While some might have had family others had nobody and no fixed abode. The Mishnah, or Oral Law, describes them in very unflattering terms. In one opinion the thought is expressed that no one should ever feel obligated to rescue a shepherd who has fallen into a pit!

The requirements of the Law were strict regarding what made a person clean or unclean. Shepherds were permanently unclean because of what they came into daily contact with, and because sheep couldn't be left alone it was physically impossible for shepherds to perform the rituals to be made clean again. What we don't realize about these ancient shepherds is that they lived with scorn and rejection. Because they were permanently defiled they could not enter the Temple, go to a synagogue, or testify in court. They were uneducated, unclean, and often suspected of being criminals. No one would welcome shepherds into their home.

Imagine then a group of shepherds standing around together in the darkness. They have gathered the flock in a sheepfold, a rough enclosure made by piling stones into a wall. The sheep have been counted and checked over for injuries. The young have been examined, and pregnant ewes taken special care of. The shepherds stand guard to protect against wolves or robbers. Suddenly,

the noisy sheep go quiet. Something is happening. A blinding light splits the sky and an angel appears. The shepherds are terrified, but the angel says, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Then there are angels everywhere singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests!"

And as suddenly as they appeared, they are gone. The shepherds are breathless with shock at what has just taken place. "To us!" the oldest shepherd exclaims. "Angels came to us!"

"But we're not good Jews!" objects a grizzled and incredulous shepherd. "I've never managed to keep the law once in my whole life. I've never been to the Temple and I sure wouldn't be welcome in a synagogue!"

"But they came to us," insists the oldest shepherd. "We're the ones everyone despises, and they came TO US. We should go to Bethlehem and see this child."

"How can we do that?" argued another, "No one will let a group of shepherds in their house!"

"Ah, but didn't you hear what the angel said?" says the youngest. This child will be wrapped in clothes and laid in a manger."

"You're right," says the eldest. "That means it's a peasant house with an open downstairs and a loft for the family to sleep in. Women always use the stone mangers to put babies in to keep them from being trampled on."

"Why wouldn't they be in the guest room?" asks their skeptical hard-nosed friend.

"Maybe the guest room is full," says the youngest, "Bethlehem is mobbed right now.

"So," concludes the eldest shepherd thinking aloud, "We go to Bethlehem to see this child. But, we're unclean, and we can't do anything about that. How can we go if we are unclean?"

"Look," says the youngest, "the angels came to us. They spoke to us just as we are. They didn't say we had to do anything first before we could go. Let's just go! Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened!"

And so, they did.

God deliberately picked those whom the religious establishment and respectable society had written off to welcome God's son into the world. What a choice! Society built walls up over centuries to exclude and reject people, even cutting them off from God by forbidding access to the Temple and the synagogue, and in one brilliant clarifying moment God swept all of that aside.

In our world there are insiders and outsiders. Politics have been turned into a religion, and political issues are portrayed in black and white. People act as if it were not possible to have compassion on both Israel and Gaza. We double down on dehumanizing those at our borders. We speak of what is happening in Ukraine because they look like us, but we barely mention the tragedy taking place in Sudan. We label, we restrict access, we gerrymander voting districts and we build walls, real and imagined. These people are educated, but those other people are ignorant rednecks. That state is red and

that state is blue. I'm right and you're wrong. *But God knocks it all down.*

God does not respect our divisions. **Our labels and judgments carry no weight with God.** God sent angels to shepherds. God recognizes our common humanity, and this Christmas God wants us to recognize our common humanity. Sin is found across the spectrum of the entire human race, and so is grace. God took on our human frailty and weakness and was born a baby in Bethlehem to rescue us from ourselves. Jesus is the gift we need most and God's love is the gift we need to share most at this time. AMEN