

The Shepherds

By Rev. Erik Buss

December 16, 2018

Shepherds were the first to be told that God had been born on earth. They were not an obvious choice for the God of the universe to announce His coming. Why were they first?

One reason is that they were not important. We expect only “important” people to visit leaders. Can you imagine what it would be like if God came down now? Dignitaries would be fighting to get there first. The shepherds would not count. Part of the reason they would have been chosen was to show us that the Lord did not come to the elite – to the Pharisees – but to everyone.

Shepherds represent simple good things done from innocent motives, the part of us that “does the good deeds of charity.” (AC 343) These may be simple acts of kindness or integrity that people don’t notice. They may involve messy work, like helping a friend in distress or apologizing.

As well as simple, kind people, shepherds were also the protectors of sheep, and we are told in New Church teaching that this role represents those who teach (AC 1571, 1613:2). It is the part of us that nurtures and protects innocence in the world. Shepherds were capable of being fierce and of leading sheep away from harm. And so this part of us is one that actively seeks to lead and help the world become a better place – the part that leads others to those good deeds of charity (AC 4713).

Shepherds were in the fields because they knew from experience what happened when they weren’t, and even at times when they were. They are not the naive idealistic part that hopes to do it right the first time. Shepherds are the part of us that has lost sheep to predators and is fierce and focused on making sure it does not happen again. This part has given in to evil and is determined to make sure it won’t happen again. It is the part that is willing to be watchful in our spiritual night hours when the rest of us is spiritually and emotionally asleep. We might ask what things we care enough about in our spiritual lives to be willing to stay up, as it were, all night for.

When this love in us is active then the Lord can send his angels to us: inspiration and insights into new ways we can embody His truth in a living, human way. And this leads to fear. Not external fear, but holy fear, the fear that we know we’ve failed in the past and we are not sure we’ll be able to succeed in this important area.

The angel's message is one of enormous promise: the Messiah has been born. And the angel's message for us is similarly large: Work on preparing for marriage with all your heart and a miraculous love can be born in you. Treat others with respect and compassion and your relationships will blossom. Master your own passions and desires and become a beacon for hope and solace among your friends,

and an oasis of peace within yourself. The question we face is if we are willing to risk moving toward that promise, if we are willing to leave the world we know and go to Bethlehem to find the Lord.

"Spiritual power is to will the good of another, and to will to convey to another as far as possible what is with oneself." (AE 79) This is what the shepherds going to Bethlehem stands for. When we serve others as far as possible because it's what the Lord says, then we find that Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths.

The Lord could have announced His advent to anyone, but he chose lowly, unimportant shepherds. And He announces Himself to our simple willingness to get on with doing what's right, to the part of us that cares enough to stay up all night to protect innocence, to the part of us that is willing to take a risk to be kind, firm, and compassionate.

Lessons: Psalm 23:1-4; Luke 2:8-20; *Apocalypse Explained* 706:12