

## The Shepherd's Way

December 13, 2020 - Bryn Athyn Cathedral – Rev. Philip B. Schnarr

**There shall be one shepherd for them all; and they shall walk in My judgments, and keep My statutes, and do them” (Ezekiel 37:24)**

Today our focus is on the shepherd story as it explores both a natural and spiritual path leading to the birth of Jesus. We will seek to discern something one might call the Shepherd's Way as we meander down a trail from where the shepherds dutifully watched their flocks during the night, to the little town of Bethlehem where Jesus had just been born.

Already this morning we have said together that portion of the Gospel of Luke 2 which we know so well. And then we had our hearts lifted up to heaven by our soloist and quartet singing those same words. But adding so much joy and beauty to the praise and glorification of our Lord.

Shepherds are mentioned over a hundred times in the Scriptures. It's an important theme for many reasons. The birth of the baby Jesus is of course the focal point as it should be for all of the subplots in the Christmas story, but let's see how vital the shepherds are in connecting us to the heart and soul of the Christmas narrative.

Now some of us love the shepherds because we have a romantic picture of people who are gentle, sort of innocent, kind and especially willing to sacrifice to protect their flocks. This quality seems to come across in the parable given by the Lord Himself of the shepherd who leaves his flock 99 sheep in order to go after just one that was lost. Sheep and especially lambs connote qualities of innocence and willingness to follow the Lord's leading. He is the Good shepherd.

Or maybe we love the shepherds because there is part of us that wants to simply feel like we belong—belong to a flock and feel that we matter to others? For many people this is very difficult right now. It can feel like we are stuck and lonely in something like “the valley of the shadow of death.”

Perhaps like me, you can never get enough of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, “*The Lord* is my shepherd, I shall not want.” In our readings we heard from the prophets, “There shall be one shepherd for them all” (Ezekiel 37:24). I will raise up over them one shepherd who shall feed them (Ezekiel

In Isaiah we read these tender words: *He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry them in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young.*(Isaiah 40:11).

So let's be clear, there is only one True and Good Shepherd. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. We are “the sheep of His pasture.” Yet, we, as finite human beings have been created by God to be images and likenesses of Him. And as such, we have been given shepherding roles and strategies by the Lord so that we can direct others and especially ourselves along the path to our spiritual rebirth – a path we might call the Shepherd's way.

Now on a very practical, external level, shepherds can be looked up to for their leadership qualities. Shepherds are often portrayed in the Scriptures as great leaders who are in charge of maintaining order and safety for their people, defending them against violent enemies. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua and David are connected to this leader-type function of the shepherd.

And so it goes throughout the Word. But shepherds are not always symbols of great leadership. After the kings, came the prophets. And the prophets talked about shepherds who were not so good. They sent bleak messages to the religious and political leaders of Israel. At times they talked about them as worthless and evil shepherds.

Zechariah said: “Woe to the *worthless shepherd* who leaves the flock (11:17)!”

Jeremiah said: “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!” says the LORD” (23:1).

So without a doubt, a shepherd kind of leadership was an important one in Biblical times, even in a negative sense. And from the following teaching in the work *Heavenly Secrets* we can see that this pattern has relevance to our lives today.

A "shepherd of the flock" is one who applies the good of neighborly love to his or her life. This must be obvious to everyone, for the shepherd is a familiar figure in the Word of both Old and New Testaments. A person who leads and teaches is called a "shepherd" and those who are led and taught are called the "flock." A person who does not lead to the good of neighborly love and teach about it, is not a true shepherd; and a person who is not led to good, and does not learn what is good, is not of the flock (343).

So, by the Lord’s definitions, leader-teacher types of people and true learning-types of people, are those who lead and learn from a desire to contribute to the common good and not just self. Today is a good time to reflect, and ask ourselves if we are trying to be this kind of shepherd? And are we also seriously trying to be “of the Lord’s flock?”

Let’s look more closely now at what is happening in the Christmas shepherd scene we enjoy so much at this time of the year.

Oddly enough, the shepherds at the time of the Lord’s birth were both literally and figuratively on the outskirts of society. They do not appear to be leader or teacher-type people. In contrast, they were very likely on the lower echelons of society. But looking more closely, the fact of the matter is that these people were *actual* shepherds. Simple folk yes, but chosen because the Lord knew they had affirmative hearts and minds to the coming of the Messiah, their Savior and Redeemer. Their real physical job was in service to others and to the welfare of their flocks.

As we know well, from the story about the evil King Herod and later the religious leaders of that time, the leader-type shepherds of that day were mostly corrupt self-serving individuals and groups. Many in their hearts were actually opposed to the coming of the One Good Shepherd who would lead the people out of their oppression and the dark times that they lived in. Jesus, the Lord, was

perceived as a real threat to the governmental authority and power of the day. In contrast to these wayward shepherds, the actual shepherds who were faithfully watching over their flocks by night out in the field, still had to put their physical lives on the line for their flocks. And they needed real courage and commitment to the flock if they were to succeed. I wonder if we were to compare them to people today, who would they be? Who would you consider as this kind of shepherd in our society?

Are they the people we see doing routine uses all around us? Are they the people with the job of watching over our food supply to keep the deliveries coming and the stores functioning safely and effectively? Are they people doing service jobs sincerely and faithfully in restaurants and sanitation? Teachers overseeing the education of our young? Most poignantly of all, are they the frontline healthcare workers who are busy night and day ministering to huge flocks who are suffering from our present health crisis?

The point is that shepherds are all over the place and they are us. In this sense we are all called to participate in the Christmas story. On the individual level are we not all shepherds? Don't we shepherd ourselves through a plethora of routine uses just to get through each day. All the domestic tasks involving meal preparation, cleaning, home maintenance, transportation and so on and on ad infinitum. Physical shepherds manage this for their sheep – moving them to fresh pasture, finding a source of water, protecting from the dangers brought on by the weather, by natural and human predators, and by the normal ups and downs associated with survival through disease and natural disasters. Yes, everyone has to be a shepherd watching over the copious duties of simply living safely and well in the natural world.

So now let's take a closer look at what *exactly* happened in the shepherd's scene of the Christmas story. Let's try to picture what they actually *did* in this story and what led them down the path or Shepherd's Way to the place where the Lord was born in their lives.

It begins with the shepherds "living out in the fields." That means they lived and worked in the same place. People working from home can identify with this. And think about it. What is your field of work? It could be your line of work or your specific discipline but in the HD a field refers to the good fertile soil in your spirit where your spiritual mind can be planted with seeds of truth from the Lord. Now the shepherds lacked clear vision, it was nighttime in the story. They had few truths to work with in this time of spiritual darkness. All of us begin the process of our spiritual rebirth, the Shepherd's way, in some degree of obscurity. The Shepherd's way unfolds slowly as we begin our spiritual journey.

But then a spectacular thing happened. An angel of the Lord suddenly burst forth surrounded by glorious light from above. And the shepherds were afraid. "Feared with great fear" is one translation. And why? Were they afraid they would die? Was this sudden glory of God a sign of impending doom? The destruction of the world?

Fear often comes from the unknown. Who was this being of light? Fear in the internal sense of the Word can also be a healthy reverential fear on the inside...*or* it can be a more harmful scary kind of fear on the outside. Perhaps those shepherds had some of each.

The angel then said, “fear not” which surely helped to reassure the shepherds. But remember that angels are also regular human beings, like you and me. Only they have travelled far along the Shepherd’s way and have been freed from evil through actually being good sheep and living by the Lord’s teachings when they were on earth. Overcoming our fears in life, both external and internal ones, is a huge step toward having the Lord born in our hearts and minds.

The angel brought good news, true news they were given from heaven. And you could say that some wonderful *instruction/teaching* was going on too. In so many words, they told the shepherds, “Your Savior, who is also the promised King has been born. Here are the directions. Find Him in the City of David. Look for the sign, He is a newborn baby dressed only in simple cloths and lying in a manger.” Very basic information for these folks who were in this moment more like sheep than shepherds.

And what is the most important and basic truth anyone could learn from the Word? The angel said it, “There is born to you this day.... a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” The threat of a total spiritual and natural devastation was averted because He had come and He alone could take away the spiritual darkness and evil which threatened all humanity. He alone is the Good Shepherd, the One Shepherd whose love and wisdom were His legacy while in the world. And this same Divine Love and Wisdom are the means we have been given to overcome the power of hell in our lives.

Now before the shepherds went to Bethlehem it says, these words: “The shepherds said to one another.” These few words, “The shepherds said to one another” seem important. Another translation could be, “The shepherds spoke together.” Yes, they talked over the angel’s message and then they responded in freedom. They were not compelled to go to Bethlehem. The Shepherd’s way can only be helpful when it is freely chosen. But when these shepherds had agreed they went with haste and an affirmative expectation. “Let us now go.”

It says then that the shepherds, “Came in haste?” Why the rush? In teachings for the New Church, “haste” is described as being, “Excited by affection and desire” (see *Apocalypse Explained* 281:10, 355:27). Their wills had been touched and so they were excited to go.

The story goes on, “They found Mary and Joseph and the Babe lying in a manger.” It might be better to say that the shepherds “sought out Mary and Joseph” so you can picture their eagerness as they swept through the streets on the hunt for the sign that the long awaited Messiah had come. Isn’t this a great metaphor for how we too seek out signs that the Lord is being born in us. Have you seen those signs in your life? Mostly the signs come in retrospect where we see that the Lord has led us through the valley of the shadow and perhaps from prayers we feel He has answered.

And when the shepherds finally arrived at their destination I picture them so enthused that they could not restrain themselves from sharing this good news with anyone and everyone. Perhaps they were reenacting the very teaching and learning experience they had just had with the angels.

So now we might be tempted to think we have reached the end of the Shepherd's way. It is a high point for sure to see the shepherds hearts on fire with glory and praise for what they have learned and shared. But wait a minute. It says in the story, "Then the shepherds returned (Luke 2: 20)." With what we know about the path of regeneration, the Shepherd's way, it's important to know that this way this way, this path is not a one-way street. It really has an upward, circular or spiral trajectory. It constantly returns upon itself as it leads us up to the mountain of the Lord.

Once we have been instructed by the Lord, have followed the signs He gives us, caught a glimpse of our Savior, we must return to the field, our everyday life, our everyday thoughts and affections. But now we can come "with haste" with fresh and renewed motivation, "excited by affection and desire." We have learned from those angels (really the Lord) new principles about what it means to love our neighbor. And a rebirth is happening within us. We have been empowered to do a better job managing our sheep. That is the Good Shepherd's way, the ongoing process of regeneration which is for us to be recreated in the image and likeness of our Maker.

So this Christmas, may the Lord give His angels charge over you, may your angels bring happy and wondrous news of how the Lord has been newly born in your life. May you be called to discover the Shepherd's way to becoming both a part of His flock but also to be a shepherd in your own right. And along the way, don't forget to watch for signs of good tidings and great joy among our fellow travelers who are travelling along the Shepherd's Way.

*"You are My flock, the flock of My pasture; you are men, and I am your God," says the Lord God"* (Ezekiel 34:31).

Amen.

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## Luke 2: 15-20

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made [f]widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

## Ezekiel

I will save My flock, and they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them—My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd.

I will make a covenant of peace with them, and cause wild beasts to cease from the land; and they will dwell safely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. “You are My flock, the flock of My pasture; you *are* men, and I *am* your God,” says the Lord GOD (Ezekiel 34: 22-31).

There shall be one shepherd for them all; and they shall walk<sup>o</sup> in My judgments, and keep My statutes, and do them (Ezekiel 37:24).

### Zechariah

Woe to the worthless shepherd, Who leaves the flock! A sword *shall be* against his arm  
And against his right eye; His arm shall completely wither; And his right eye shall be totally blinded  
(Zechariah 11: 17).

But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” ... As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock *and* one shepherd (John 10: 2-5;14,16).

### Arcana Coelestia

A person’s regeneration is an image of the Lord’s glorification. To make His Human Divine the Lord came into the world in the ordinary way, that is, He was willing to be born as any other person is born, to *receive instruction as any other does*, and to be born again as any other, but with this difference: People are born again from the Lord, whereas the Lord not only regenerated Himself from Himself, but also glorified Himself, that is, made Himself Divine; also, people are made new through the influx of charity and faith, whereas the Lord was made so through the influx of Divine Love that was within Him and that was His own. From this it may be seen that our regeneration is an image of the Lord's glorification, or what amounts to the same, that in the process of our regeneration as the image one can envisage, though remotely, the process of the Lord's glorification. (Arcana Coelestia 3138).

### Apocalypse Revealed

"For the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them" (Revelation 7:17). This symbolically means that the Lord alone will teach them.

The Lamb in the midst of the throne symbolizes the Lord in respect to His Divine humanity in the inmost of heaven and thus in everything connected with it. The throne is heaven, and the Lamb is the Lord in respect to His Divine humanity. And He who is in the inmost of heaven and thus in everything connected with it is the only one who shepherds all people, that is, who teaches them.

If a question is raised as to how He alone can shepherd all, be it known that it is because He is God, and because He is present in the whole of heaven like the soul in its body; for heaven, arising from Him, is like a single person (Apocalypse Revealed 383).