

CHRISTMAS: IN FAITH WE WELCOME AND RECEIVE THE LORD

The Nativity of Our Lord Christmas Eve

December 24, 2006

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

As Shepherds Watched Their Flocks

Despite their lowly status in first-century Palestine, the shepherds played a significant role in the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Today's Gospel reading from Luke narrates those events, telling us that the shepherds in that region were out in the fields watching over their flocks on what must have seemed like any other night. That's what shepherds did: they were totally responsible for the sheep, risking their own lives to protect the lives of the sheep. If caves were nearby, they could spend the night in them; if not, they slept under the stars or in a lightweight tent they could easily move from place to place.

Nothing is significant yet about these shepherds; they were simply doing what they needed to do. But suddenly one of God's angels stood before them, with God's glory shining brightly in their sleepy eyes. The biblical text tells us they were terrified. But this was no ordinary fear. They knew they were standing in the very presence of the Lord, so they had every right to be afraid. This was a fear of the Holy One of Israel!

The angel gave the shepherds a very important message of identification about a recent birth that had occurred in Bethlehem. This baby, said the angel, was the Messiah—the Anointed One that had been promised long ago. Then, in order to confirm the truth of this astonishing message, a group of angels sang praises to God...right there in the dark field, with nothing around but sheep and a handful of flabbergasted shepherds.

These shepherds were the first to hear the Good News about this newborn, and with little hesitation they headed off to Bethlehem to see the Messiah for themselves. When they found Mary, Joseph, and the baby, they repeated what God's Messenger had told them: this child was their Messiah! After their act of proclamation, the shepherds returned to their responsibilities out in the fields, praising God for what had just happened...yet probably never being quite the same again.

The shepherds were not predisposed to hearing such divine messages; there was nothing especially extraordinary or other-worldly about these shepherds. They were simply carrying out their responsibilities as part of the routines of daily life. But out of their routines, out of the

ordinariness of their lives, out of their realization that this news had to be shared came a message that has turned the world upside-down: this baby was no ordinary baby! And that same news is the promise that Christmas brings each and every year.

As you reflect on the Gospel reading, ask yourself these questions: Do the routines of my life block out the hope that Jesus' birth offers? Do I allow myself to set aside ordinary responsibilities to share the Good News about Jesus' lowly birth in Bethlehem? Do I remind myself of the surprise that God used to wake up the world in sending the Messiah in the form of an innocent baby?

We are called to proclaim the Good News about Christmas in the midst of the ordinariness of our lives and through our willingness to share its message with those around us. Let the promise of Christmas challenge us once again to proclaim what we have witnessed. Let these lowly shepherds serve as models of obedience, and may the world hear the Good News through us. The Messiah has come! Glory to God in the highest!

The Reflection for Christmas Eve was prepared by Steve Berneking, Ph.D., who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Senior Manager in the Translation Unit of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This night we remember to pray and offer thanks to God for the gift of his Son, the long-promised Messiah. On this holy night, we open our hearts to welcome and receive the Christ Child. Like the shepherds, may we praise God and proclaim the Good News that the Savior is born.

Activity Corner: "A Child Is Born" Christmas Banner

Supplies needed: Bible; 9" x 13" piece of solid color fabric (felt or burlap); felt scraps in a variety of colors; paste or glue; scissors; stapler; wooden dowel (12" long, 1/4" wide); yarn or string; sheet of drawing paper; pencil or pen.

Sketch a simple design pertaining to the birth of Jesus on a sheet of drawing paper and then prepare patterns for each component of the design. Cut out the design from scraps of felt and glue the design onto the solid piece of fabric. Fold down the top 2" of the fabric and secure with staples. Leave a loop large enough to slide the dowel through. Attach yarn or string to each end of the dowel to make a wall hanging. Display the banner where you gather for family devotions throughout the Christmas season.

Conclude your devotions by reading together Isaiah 9:2-7 and singing some of your favorite Christmas carols.