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While shepherds watch'd their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around.

“Fear not,” said he, for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled mind;
“Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind.”

In first-century Judea, the little town of Bethlehem was known for two things, first for being the home of the great King, David, and for its shepherds and sheep. Bethlehem is only a two hour walk from the Temple in Jerusalem, and provided most of the sheep that were sacrificed daily in the Temple. Thus, it is no surprise that according to tradition, those shepherds whom we have hymned, who we hear in the Gospel were visited by the angels and invited to come worship the new-born Christ, were raising sheep to be sacrificed in the Temple. We can only wonder if these shepherds grasped the meaning of it all, that this Savior, born in the City of David, a mere babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, is Himself the Lamb of God, and would be the sacrifice for their sins.

But let us consider the very field in which the shepherds were keeping their flocks. Ancient Israel, like modern Israel, is very much tied to land held as sacred. It was important for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem because He is of the House of the David, He is a descendant of King David, who was also born in Bethlehem. The very name, Bethlehem, means *house of bread*, and so it is no coincidence that Jesus, who says *I am the Bread of Life*, is born in the *house of bread*. But even the spot of land known as the Shepherd's Field has its own holy associations. It is believed to be the same field where a young boy named David tended his father, Jesse's sheep, played his harp, and fought off a lion. It is where the Prophet Samuel offered a lamb as a sacrifice to God after anointing David King of Israel, an event which likely also took place in the same field. The ownership of the field was passed down to David's father, Jesse, by his own father Boaz. It is the place where Boaz first met the Moabite widow, Ruth, and bade his workers leave grain in the field so that Ruth could glean enough to feed herself and her mother-in-law Naomi. It is also believed to be the place where Boaz married Ruth, where the young woman once considered

a traitor for marrying into a family who left Israel for the land of Moab was redeemed.

The field is also unique physically, it is a hilly field, lined with caves that run along one side. These caves provide the perfect shelter to pen a flock of sheep in for the night, with the shepherds sleeping at the mouths of the caves. It is believed this is where the shepherds were when *the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them*, illuminating the night and the caves. No wonder they were *sore afraid*. They are bidden by an angel, out of the cave, to go and see their Savior, Christ the Lord. And suddenly, with the angel there is a multitude of the *heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace good will toward men*. The Shepherd's find exactly what the angel foretold, a mile or so away from their field, a babe *wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a stone manger*, He, His Mother, and foster-father are huddled in another cave which had been converted into a stable.

Like Plato's cave allegory, the shepherds are called out of their caves, no longer to see the shadow of reality, but invited to go and see the ultimate reality for themselves which is Jesus Christ. A few lines after tonight's Gospel reveals what happens, *And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger*. What a startling reality that must have been, that there on a cold stone manger, as is found in that part of the world, filled with straw, lies the savior of the world, Christ the Lord, a poor helpless new-born wrapped in swaddling clothes, strips of linen rags. Even though these were shepherds whose livelihoods depended on their sheep being sacrificed in the Temple, an essential component to the worship of Almighty God, these were men considered to be ordinary people, if not looked down on because of their rustic and mundane line of work. And yet these are the first invited to Christ. They are first to come face to face with the Lamb of God who has come to put an end to that old way of life. What must they have thought when they looked down to see that helpless infant?

What they saw there, and what was revealed to their hearts in that moment, they must have accepted in faith. St. Luke's Gospel says that the shepherds became the first evangelists of sorts, for *when they had seen...they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept*

all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying, and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them. They looked into the face of reality and went away glorifying and praising God.

What if we had been in that number of shepherds bidden to the manger, to behold the face of reality for ourselves? As Christians, this is what we are invited to contemplate every Christmas. That as we sit in the caves of our own lives, the shadows of our constructed worlds, and false realities, among all the decorations, ornaments, and presents, we are called to come and see, to come spiritually to that stable, to catch a glimpse into the eyes of life itself, all in the hope that we will come away glorifying and praising God. We are after all, *the sheep of His hand the flock of His pasture*, and the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes has become our own Good Shepherd. The prophecy is just as true then as it is today, *the dayspring from on high hath visited us: to give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

*All glory be to God on high
And on the earth be peace;
Good will henceforth from heav'n to men
Begin and never cease. Amen.*