

The Shepherd in Us

by the Rev. Karl R. Alden

The marvel of the Word, as it is revealed in the Heavenly Doctrines for the New Church is that it never grows old because in its internal sense it always tells a story that deals with us living in the present. The Lord did, indeed, come into the world of people and nature nearly two thousand years ago. He came, as the story tells us, when Herod was king of Judea. He was born, as the Gospel announces, of Mary, His virgin mother. Yet, this outward birth—when He bowed the heavens to sojourn for a few short years among the creatures that He had made—this outward birth, majestic as it was, serves clearly to prepare our minds to see another birth—the birth of the Lord into our own hearts today! It is this birth that is vital to us. This is the fact that gives us hope and courage, the event that fills our minds with radiant light and our hearts with warm love. For, as the Lord was born into the world in bygone years, so, in like manner today, He may be spiritually born with each one of us.

From the Heavenly Doctrines we learn that the Lord came into the world when people needed Him for their salvation. Evil forces in the spiritual world had beclouded people's minds, had risen up to such an extent that people on earth were being cut off from the influx of heaven. And, unless this influx could be restored by the Lord's personal advent on earth, the human race would have perished.

In like manner, with each one of us, temptations come; darkness sets in and our natural selfishness seeks to destroy us. When such states arise, let us remember the words of the Christmas story: "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night." There is a shepherd in each one of us, a shepherd that leads and guides: the spiritual principles that form the conviction of our religion. Our religious principles, the truths which we believe, must keep watch over our states of innocence, the tender and beautiful goods implanted in each one of us as children. These holy states are represented by sheep in the Word. It is because sheep have this representation that the Lord is called the Good Shepherd.

The truths of religion are our shepherd, and they lead us through the darkness of night, the night of ignorance and despair. Remember, the Lord came to the world in the days of Herod the king. It was during *his* reign that the shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks by night. Herod's reign signifies the rule of falsity and the slavery induced by evil. We, too, live in a spiritual reign of Herod when more and more people doubt the rule of a supreme God, and the belief in a life after death has become faint. It is through this night of distress, which comes to each of us during temptation, that we must guard and protect every spiritual truth that has been implanted in us as the shepherds watched over their flocks.

If we are faithful to our task, the time will come when we will be prepared to receive a wonderful confirmation of the truths that we have followed. These truths will lead, inevitably, to an understanding of where the Lord may be found. When the angel appeared to the shepherds, he said to them, "This will be the sign to you: you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.