

Shepherds in the Same Country

Raising Our Children in Cooperation with the Lord

by the Rev. Karl R. Alden

And suddenly there was with the angel 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 shepherds were guardians of their flocks through fair weather and foul. They watched over them in the bright sunshine of day and in the silver moonlight of night. Sometimes there was only a faint glimmer of starlight. Perhaps, too, they struggled through the blackness of starless nights, lit only by lurid flashes of lightning. No matter what the conditions that the shepherds were called upon to serve in, they were faithful to their task.

The Scripture says, "In the same country." In the same country as what? In the same country where the Lord was born, in that very same country, there were "shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night." All of us are spiritually in the same country as where the Lord was born, if we are keeping watch by night over the flocks entrusted to our care. If we are blessed to be parents, if the Lord has entrusted to us human lives who may become angels of heaven, if we are among those fortunate enough to be called Mother or Father, then the richest and most sacred trust given into our care is the lives of our growing children.

There will be moments when it is easy to keep watch over our flock, times when the joy of the situation will prove to be its own reward and when the answering smiles of youth will more than make up for the sacrifices of age. But there will be other times when our minds will be clouded, when only with the greatest difficulty will we be able to grope for the light to guide us in performing our part in raising our children. Yet grope we must, and with courage, too, for the responsibility upon which we have embarked is one which cannot be forsaken.

Surely it is heartening to know that we are not strangers to His country. Surely it is encouraging for us to feel that insofar as we perform our part in rearing and educating our children sincerely, justly, and faithfully—so far we, too, are shepherds in the same country. And those who are not parents still have a duty to perform toward the rising generations. "Feed my lambs," the Lord told His disciple, Peter.

The faithfulness of someone who strives on through the adversity of night and wills to succeed, even though he cannot see the next step ahead, is among the heroic symbols of all ages—the faithful shepherd. If, passing through this world and on into eternity, we could have but one sentence said of us, could we long for one more beautiful than that which the Scriptures record concerning those men on the hills of Bethlehem, those faithful shepherds "keeping watch over their flock by night"?

Such faithfulness brought its reward to the shepherds, and a similar faithfulness will be equally rewarding today. For what nourishes the stout heart and courageous mind to face the unknown blackness of despair has not changed with the passing of centuries. Men and women today, who

are steadfast and conscientious in performing their tasks, will be nourished by the same life and light that sustained the shepherds on the lonely hills of Bethlehem two thousand years ago. And what was the reward that came to them? They had watched many nights in the darkness, faithfully shepherding their flocks. Finally, the darkness of night gave way, and the light of heaven shone upon them. The radiant figure of an angel spoke to them, saying, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

The inner meaning or correspondences of these passages are so simple, so plain, so beautiful, that it is easy to read the story of the Christ Child in our own lives. The Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church tell us that an angel represents the truth. To the shepherds on the hillsides of Bethlehem, an angel came, tearing aside the veil of darkness and bringing the message of salvation. Just so, the Heavenly Doctrines tell us, to those whose minds struggle in the gloom and darkness of despair, who faithfully watch over the sacred remains implanted in infancy (the flocks by night), the glorious light of truth will inevitably come in time.

This light will break in upon our minds and pierce the shadows of doubt. The message will not fall from the lips of an angel, as it did for the shepherds, but it will come as illumination to our searching minds, which is far more abiding. We will see the light of truth, and the light of truth will instruct us as unerringly as the angel instructed the shepherds. It will tell us that in Bethlehem (“the house of bread”) we will find the Savior, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. The swaddling clothes are the simplest truths in which God is clothed. These simple truths wrap up our idea of the Lord in the beginning of our lives, in childhood. The manger, which is the source of food for horses, corresponds to understanding the Word.

Having found the Word, wrapped in these simple truths, each of us will go on to ever deeper understanding of the supreme glory of the Lord’s coming on earth to reveal Himself to those whom He created. Thus, in our day and age, we are the shepherds keeping watch over our flocks on the lonely hills of Bethlehem. It is our high privilege to live in the same country as the infant Savior. Faithfulness to our trust will bring its own reward—the darkness will disperse and all of heaven will be lit with the message of the Lord’s birth: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”