

A Sign to the Shepherds

by the Rev. Ragnar Boyesen

“And this will be the sign to you: you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12).

A manger was a most unusual place to find the King of the world. Equally unusual was the innocence of the shepherds who were willing to be led to their newborn Savior in that manger. Their innocence, the quality of being willing to be led by the Lord, was what could receive this glorious message.

When the Lord came into the world, He did not choose to clothe Himself in silk and splendor. Neither did He want to lie in a costly bed surrounded by the dignitaries of the world. Had He chosen to do this, He would not have had those correspondences around Him, which, for the angels who attended His coming, were significant in every detail.

When the Lord chose to be born, He first lay in a manger because the angels understood this to mean instruction from the Word. A manger is a feeding trough for mules and horses. When He grew the Lord would give His own doctrine to those who would follow Him. Therefore, at His birth, the angels could think of the new understanding of the Word which would become present among people, because the Lord Himself was the Word that would be the new spiritual food for humanity.

And angels thought of the lack of faith in the Jewish Church when Mary and Joseph had to find shelter in a stable and not at the inn. The stable was most likely a simple enclosure, hewn out of a rock or hillside. This, again, signifies the natural sense of the Word, which often is represented by hills or mountains. Even the name of the town *Bethlehem*, which means “house of bread,” gave angels a chance to reflect on the spiritual nourishment which would come from the Lord through the Christian Church.

Ephratah, an older name for the place, signified the state of charity which had once existed in the Ancient Church, a state which would be renewed in the Lord Himself, since He was the only one to be born of the Divine Itself, through a virgin mother. With the Divine Father in Him, He was the only one who had a conjunction of the internal good with the external good, since He alone was born a celestial-spiritual man. Since the Lord alone was born the spiritual King, He had, from His very birth, a conjunction of truth and good in His natural. This is called the spiritual of the celestial, which is represented by Bethlehem where He was born and which made the angels think of the wonderful presence of the Lord in all creation from the very beginning.

The celestial presence in all humanity had been destroyed by people who chose *themselves* instead of the Lord, and in this way began to fabricate evils for themselves. The celestial of the Lord could not be present with those people, and so a prophecy was made that in the future, One would be born into the world who would unite the celestial to the spiritual in Himself, and in this way reconcile that which had been destroyed in humanity (see *Apocalypse Explained* 449:3). A spiritual night had fallen on the human race. Yet a star shone out of David.

But when the shepherds hurried toward Bethlehem they knew nothing of the wonderful anticipation of the angels who had seen and comprehended the Lord's coming in light and who guided them in the darkness of the night toward "the Dayspring from on high." Nevertheless, the shepherds, delighted at the wonderful message, hurried to Bethlehem to search for the sign, a baby lying in a manger.

Most likely they did not have to go very far, because they probably knew that the inns were full, and that mangers existed in stables close to the inns. Did the shepherds go from stable to stable? Probably, using their knowledge of Bethlehem, they were able to ask where people had been shown a stable for shelter.

These shepherds were living representatives of the church that was to come, the church that would feed from the spiritual manger of the new evangel (good news or gospel) from the Lord. By being able to affectionately receive the doctrines from the Lord based on their remains, such people would receive lasting spiritual nourishment.

When the shepherds finally came to the stable, they found a Babe "wrapped in swaddling cloths." The angels understood this sign (the swaddling cloths) to mean those first truths of innocence and Divine love which come to all people who, early in life, are given the stories of the Word so that they can understand and delight in them. On the other hand, a naked infant means someone lacking truths.

The Lord had come to feed all those who were spiritually hungry for new truths, for heavenly light that could show them how to walk and live the way to heaven. The Ancient Church's hope had been nourished on the primary truth that satisfied this hunger: the promise of the Divine Love for the salvation of all people. Joy in the salvation of humanity would be shared by the Lord with the angels of the celestial heaven. And hope for the salvation of all people became the distinguishing mark of Christianity.

This truth, about the salvation of mankind, is even today the spiritual nourishment we must live by. The beginning of this hope was in the spiritual sign of the holy Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. Our hope is that the Lord may be present, in His simple accommodations of truth found in the Word, so that we can be nourished to receive charity and a love of salvation. In childhood we understand dimly, yet we perceptively cherish what we learn about the Lord's wondrous birth. The innocence of ignorance holds fast to the hope of the Lord at Christmas time, that He will come again, that He will send angels, that peace will exist among people. These are the truths seen in darkness, yet cherished in innocence. These truths are our spiritual nourishment from the beginning, the bread of heaven that children and adults alike must partake of. We should desire this nourishment with a spiritual hunger, a longing to be fed from the spiritual manger of the Word.

If, like the shepherds, we come to Bethlehem—the Lord's "house of bread"—we will know that He what we long for; He is both the sign and the fulfillment of our spiritual life. We cannot have spiritual life without this food from heaven. So, even as we strive to tend our spiritual *sheep*—our innocence and willingness to be led by the Lord—we long to be instructed by a genuine

understanding of the Word; we long to glorify our Creator and to show genuine peace and good will toward people. By being fed from the manger of the Word, we can sustain the early love of truths, the love of gratefully acknowledging that the Lord alone can save us and bring light to our spiritual darkness. Everything that moves us deeply is a means of instruction and a bond to heaven and our fellow people. We can rejoice with exceeding joy that we are permitted to share this blessed realization!

This was so well understood by the people of the Ancient Church that they expressed their gratefulness in song, perhaps a song similar to the one of the angels who glorified the Lord on the night He was born.

The songs of the Ancient Church, like those of the Jewish, were prophetic and treated of the Lord, especially of His advent into the world and of His liberation of the faithful from the assaults of the diabolical crew. The attendant angels were at the same time in glorification of the Lord, in consequence of which those who sang and those who heard the songs experienced heavenly gladness from the holiness and blessedness which flowed in from heaven, so that they seemed to themselves to be as it were taken up into heaven. Such an effect had the songs of the church among the ancients, and such an effect they might also have at this day, because the spiritual angels are especially affected by songs which relate to the Lord, His kingdom, and the church. For the ancients who were of the church derived a joy exceeding all joys from the thought of the Lord's advent, and of the salvation of the human race by Him (Arcana Coelestia 8261).

So, even in our age, we can sing like the choir of angels that sang to the shepherds: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 2:1-20, *Apocalypse Explained* 706:12