

Food for Thought—The Shepherds and the Angels

When we love something, it is worth noting that we love it and pondering why. One thing we clearly love is the account of the angelic host visiting the shepherds of Bethlehem--we see this part of the story mentioned over and over in Christmas carols (look at all the verses in carols, not just the first verse, and you will be well rewarded). And it is worth thinking about why we love this part of the story.

God sent Gabriel to Zacharias (John the Baptist's father), to Mary, and to Joseph, so it is not just the shepherds who received an angelic visit. Mary, Joseph, and Zachariah, however, each needed to know what was going on so that they could understand and respond properly to the roles God was giving them; their visitations had a practical aspect. Likewise, the Wise Men, recognized the Star that led them to Jesus, something which gave them joy and fulfillment. But their visit also served a practical need—their valuable gifts would no doubt help Joseph make the hasty escape to Egypt and the sojourn there, a costly undertaking.

The angelic visit to the shepherds, however, is a bit different. It didn't have to happen to fulfill any practical needs in the story. Instead, it seems to have happened simply because God wanted to do it, and that means it shows us God's heart. God sent the highest beings he had created (angels) to representatives of the most ordinary of humans (shepherds). To shepherds, God sent not just one angel (which is quite enough to qualify as an overwhelming experience), but a huge gathering of angels. God made it very, very clear that the humblest of humans is important to Him. And the words of the angelic message remove any doubt ("Peace on earth, good will toward men"). The most basic things we desperately need and long to know are that God is there, that He sees us and cares about us, and that His intentions toward us are good ("good will toward men"). The angels' visit to the shepherds made those most important things clear.

Finally, it is also encouraging to see how the shepherds responded. They immediately acted in faith, they sought out Jesus, they found Him, and then they told their story.

--Sally Mahoney (nee McKenney)