

In Nomine Iesu

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Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled,
Within my heart that it may be
A quiet chamber kept for Thee. Amen.
(*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* #123, v. 13)

I. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

It was a normal night as far as the shepherds were concerned. They were used to working under the stars. Their job was to keep the sheep safe from predators and thieves. They were totally unaware that something had just happened in the nearby town of Bethlehem that would change not just their lives but the whole course of human history. They were unaware of these workings of God, but He was not unaware of them.

Even more closely than they kept watch over their sheep, the LORD kept watch over these shepherds. He knew each one. He loved them. He had chosen them to be unwitting witnesses of the fulfillment of His greatest promise—the sending of His Son in human flesh to save the world of sinners. Whatever concerns occupied their minds—workplace tensions, money problems, relationship issues, personal struggles—these concerns were about to melt away like snow in springtime.

The LORD looks upon you with the same love and care as those Bethlehem shepherds. He knows the troubles you face in your life, the burdens that weigh you down. He knows you personally, and He loves you. For you, just as much as for the shepherds, God the Father sent His only-begotten Son. He sent His Son to bear your sin and conquer your death. In the fields outside the little town of Bethlehem, the shepherds' entire outlook changed on the night of Jesus' birth, just as it has for you. Life is no longer dullness and despair. It is hope and peace and joy through the incarnate Son of God.

Hymn #137.1-3 – “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

II. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

Standing in the holy presence of the LORD made their un-holiness all the more obvious. They felt exposed. They wanted to hide. That was the condition of Adam and Eve after they disobeyed the command of God and fell into sin. When they heard the sound of the Lord walking in the Garden of Eden, “they hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God” (Gen. 3:8).

But they couldn't really hide, not from God. Hebrews 4 says that "*no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account*" (v. 13). This is why the shepherds were "*sore afraid*," literally, why "*they were afraid with a great fear*." They could not see God, but they were surrounded by His glory, and that was enough to get their knees shaking. They knew in that moment what St. Paul later wrote about all mankind, "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Rom. 3:23).

We have all inherited Adam's sin, and we have heaped up piles and piles of our own sins. If the glory of the Lord surrounded us right now, we would cower in fear too. But the fear that the shepherds felt was soon removed by the comforting words of the angel. The glory of the Lord shone around them because God had come to earth not to destroy sinners but to save them.

Hymn #126.1-3 – "God Rest You Merry"

III. And the angel said unto them, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

The angel did not tell the shepherds, "Fear not, for you are good men. God is pleased with your righteous lives." He did not say, "Fear not, for God has seen your humble efforts to do what is good and kind, as opposed to the proud and the powerful who harm others." If the angel had said that, I imagine the shepherds would have continued to be afraid because they knew their own sinful hearts.

The angel said "*fear not*" because he had good news to share with them, "*good tidings of great joy*." And it wasn't just good news for them; it was good news for all people: "*For unto you – for you – is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord*." The cowering shepherds were comforted by the message that God had kept His promise, the promise first delivered to Adam and Eve. The promise was that the Seed of the woman would crush Satan's head and free all people from his kingdom of darkness and death.

The details shared by the angel were mind boggling. This Savior was the Christ, the anointed One prophesied throughout the Old Testament. He was the Lord – the true God – and yet the angel said He had been born! How could this be? How could the Lord be born a Baby? How could God take on flesh? The shepherds were about to find out because this amazing birth had taken place "*in the city of David*," in Bethlehem, within sight of where they were. So now their fear turned to wonder as they – and we with them – ponder these "*glad tidings of great joy*."

Hymn #123.1-5 – "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come"

IV. "And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

The sign for the shepherds to find the Christ-Child was not to look for a Baby glowing with heavenly light or to look for a Child surrounded by the rich and famous. The sign was a Baby

wrapped in swaddling clothes—not so uncommon for a newborn—and lying in a manger—now that was unique! They would not have to enter any gated communities or knock on any palace doors this night. They were sent to look for a little stable with a humble manger that held the greatest treasure the world had ever seen.

The Son of God entered the world as a lowly Baby instead of a powerful King, so He could redeem the entire human race from the moment of conception throughout childhood and into adulthood. He lived a perfect life at every stage to fulfill God's Commandments for us. Then He was laid upon another rough piece of wood, so that His hands and feet could be nailed to the cross for His atoning death in our place.

Hebrews 2 explains why all this had to be: *"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery"* (vv. 14-15). In that Baby *"wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger,"* we find our salvation and our life.

Hymn #119 – "Away in a Manger"

V. 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 angel had delivered the message. He had shared the good news about God entering His creation to redeem mankind. Why would God show such compassion for these weak beings who sinned against Him? What made them worth it? These thoughts did not even cross the minds of the holy angels. They know that everything God does is good and right. They perfectly obey the will of the holy God and gladly serve Him.

And now, a great multitude of angels filled the night sky outside Bethlehem singing the praises of God and glorifying His name. *"Glory to God in the highest,"* they sang, *"and on earth peace, good will toward men!"* That summed it all up. In His mercy, God the Father did not want to destroy sinners; He wanted to save them. He sent His Son to make peace, to atone for all sin by shedding His holy blood.

We still sing this song of the angels. Each Sunday in the Divine Service, we sing these words after hearing the absolution announced by the pastor: *"By the authority of God and of my holy office I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* That is what Jesus came to do for us—forgive our sins and win for us eternal life. So hearing what God has accomplished for you and me, we join the angels in giving *"Glory to God in the highest"* for His gifts of goodness and peace.

Hymn #125.1-3 – "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"

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