

Summoning Shepherds

[“The Wonder of Peace” video, part I]

‘Anyone who’s ever worked with livestock knows just how true that video is. Though we only kept angus cattle, chickens, rabbits, and sometimes hogs, and never sheep, a neighbor about a mile northwest of us did keep a flock. And there was little difference between them, but as dumb as cattle could be, and I have some stories!, sheep apparently are worse, to being nearly brainless. In the Holy Bible, the Lord refers to us as sheep repeatedly. And not just as sheep, but many times as “lambs”, and as we know baby sheep are even stupider than full-grown sheep.

The wonder of Christmas is a miracle. The miracle of Christmas is so stupendous and massive in its implications and repercussions that no one, absolutely no one, least of all the arch adversary of God, the devil himself, had an inkling of what was coming. That God, the Three in One, would clothe in human flesh one of His personages, the Word, sending Himself into the womb of a specially chosen young virgin woman, to be clothed with a human body, literally becoming a human man, a son of Adam according to human flesh, but without the sin nature passed down from him, literally become a New Man, was inconceivable. But all that would come later. Like any human baby, He would have to

grow up first. The miracle of the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen, “recreating” Himself as one of His creatures, is simply beyond our capacity to understand. He alone could fathom it, let alone successfully pull it off! The miracle is so incomprehensible that though nearly all the world in some fashion celebrates or observes Christmas, most never consider anything past the feel-good vibes of Santa Claus amusing children, exchanging gifts, and making contributions to charities. But the absolute core, center, and entire reason for being of Christmas is the Christ Child. Truly He is the reason for the season! And while it may seem that He is being ignored, suppressed, or even shoved off the stage in more and more ways, even this year, a full 43 of our state capitals displayed a nativity scene! More than ever before! It may be getting darker, but the Light is also shining brighter. Seems like there’s a scripture that says exactly that.

We all should know and personally experienced God’s perfection. There is no other Being that is perfect. And since He’s perfect, everything He does is so perfect that we never plumb the depths of its transcendent perfectness, its unapproachable excellency of perfection. It’s displayed in spades at His very birth. Though coming from the very throne room of Heaven, He’s not born on earth in a palace. Or even a nice house. No. He’s born exactly where He needs to be. In a cave in the earth. Where livestock are kept, actually lambs, that is, baby sheep, are born. Where the present-day Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem

stands, underneath its heavily ornamented and decorated grotto is a cave, and almost certainly the actual cave where Lord Jesus was born; containing the actual “manger” feeding trough carved in the wall, where He first rested His head to sleep on the very earth He had spoken into being so many millennia ago. But this was no ordinary cave where He was born. It had a special designation and particular purpose.

As no detail in the Holy Bible is there by accident, even the most minute, why were the very people to hear the Good News of the birth of the Savior of God the “shepherds abiding in the field”? Think how they heard. They were given what few people, perhaps none before and none since, an angelic visitation of not just one messenger who not only appeared in glory and spoke about the birth of Christ, but also an entire army of Heaven’s angels filling the sky praising the Christ Child! Here are all these angels, eager to see for themselves for the very first time the Face of Him Who created them, and Whom they serve ceaselessly. As God radiates light so brilliant that none can look upon it and live, they had never seen God’s face. And now, after emerging from Mary’s womb, here He is. No wonder the “rank and file” and commanders of Heaven’s armies crowded the skies over Bethlehem to glimpse this sight never before seen!

But just who were these shepherds? We’re often told they just represent the lowest of humanity, that God is showing His love for all humanity, and so blesses these “unwashed”, unedu-

cated “deplorables”, farm hands with this divine fireworks display to end all displays. But these particular shepherds were not in the fields surrounding Bethlehem by chance. On these very fields were raised the sheep destined to be sacrificed in the Temple for the daily sacrifices, a minimum of two every day, day in and day out. But during special festivals, many more were sacrificed, meaning that for just the prescribed sacrificial lambs, 1,063 were sacrificed every year, not counting those brought by individual worshippers, which amounted to hundreds more. This doesn’t count the other livestock and birds offered. Plus the oil, fruit, grain, and bread offerings. These animals were not just killed and burnt. No, they went to feed the priests and Levites and their families. But the defining characteristic of these sacrificial animals was that they had to be without blemish or defect.

And so the sacrificial animals were raised on these specially-designated, nearby ranches by specially-designated shepherds. These shepherds were experts in their field, for they could not allow any animal with even a single defect to be sacrificed in the Temple. As opposed to ordinary, rural shepherds, these shepherds were legally required to keep watch over their flocks, 24/7, to insure they didn’t injure themselves and become unusable as sacrifices. Which is why when lambs were born, they were quickly wrapped in “swaddling cloths”, strips of cloth, tied around their legs to prevent them from injuring themselves. It was an important business to keep these little ones “perfect”.

Luke seems like he says that Mary, with nothing else available at hand, by accident, “evidently”, had to also use these same swaddling cloths, always stocked in these stable caves for use on all newborn lambs. So here, as the angels told the shepherds that they would recognize the Savior of the World by this sign, they would see a Babe wrapped in these very same swaddling cloths. Human babies were not wrapped in these animal cloths. Except this One! Because, God is showing the world, and the shepherds in particular who could not miss the implications, that This was indeed to become the sacrificial Lamb for all the sins of the world. The proclamation had been made for all to see. Yet, how that would play out three decades in the future, other than Christ Himself, absolutely no one could yet discern.

[“The Wonder of Peace” video, part II]

With the angels visiting the shepherds, and their worshipping the newborn Babe of God in the stable cave, that He was the One and Only Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world had now been proclaimed unmistakably. But we also know that while Lord Jesus is the Lamb That Was Slain, He is simultaneously the Chief Shepherd of the lambs of God, God’s sheep, namely us! We recall how our Lord Jesus commissioned Apostle Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. “Feed My sheep”, “shepherd My sheep”, “tend My lambs”, He commanded Peter. And Peter, as the leader of the apostles, was at this point not a sheep but become a shepherd of the sheep. So, with that example in mind,

when the One and Only Living God came forth as a Baby Boy, the angel was dispatched to the shepherds, summoning them to the Lord's birthplace, not just because they would understand what was being shown them, but also because they were shepherds themselves. So too were the wise men, who would arrive later. Now, it was like, One Shepherd, Chief Shepherd, to other shepherds, "Guys, this is what's up. The time's coming when people are going to grow up from being sheep and become shepherds". For this is the way God designed life. We're each born as babes, just as Lord Jesus was. Like little lambs, we need tender, loving care. But we don't stay babes. We grow up and become adults, and become shepherds, disciplers, to the younger believers who come and become, first, baby lambs, who themselves grow up to become mature in the faith so as to bring forth yet new "babes" in the saving faith of Christ. So you sheep, the Baby Lamb of God in the manger has summoned you too, to become shepherds!

Please join and sing together now of His miraculous birth!

["O Holy Night" music video]

