

Shepherds

Isaiah 9:6-7

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD, Almighty will accomplish this.”

YOUR BIBLE REFERENCE: *And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. (NIV Luke 2:8-16)

BACKGROUND: The residence of the Shepherds is not mentioned. We do not know where they were keeping watch. We have assumed that Bethlehem is the answer in each case. There is today, about a mile east of the convent at Bethlehem, a small bedraggled hamlet called “The Village of

the Shepherds”. Queen Helena built a church in a field there, the belief that it was the actual field of the Shepherds. The phrase “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem (KJV Luke 2:15) suggest they were some distance away. The Evangelist says they were “in the same county” (KJV Luke 2:8), which merely means “within walking distance.” It was customary to keep flocks close to the village during the winter months. They were taken to their distant summer pastures in march, and returned home in November.

Shepherds lived with their sheep. They were dedicated people. Their life was a hard one. They were exposed to the elements at all seasons. They were denied the simplest amenities of life. They were despised because they always smelled like sheep. In a settlement of people, it wasn't practical that each family could take their sheep and goats (the word “sheep” could be used for either sheep or goat) out to pasture. Therefore, shepherds were hired. They could be hired to look after the sheep for the whole village. Sheep were a family's security. Oftentimes, they would keep one goat with them and send the rest off with a shepherd. (Village people could refer to the shepherds who are keeping watch over “their sheep”.)

The equipment of the shepherd was standard and simple. He wore a cloak made of sheepskin with the wool left on it. This protected him from the rain and the cold. At night, he wrapped himself in it. He made sure his head was covered, even if his feet were exposed. The cloak had an inside pocket large enough to hold an injured or newborn lamb. A bigger sheep needing help was carried on his shoulder. (KJV Luke 15:5). The shepherd's belt was worn outside the cloak. Attached to this belt was a wallet (or called a Scrip). This was a large leather pouch. In it, he carried his supplies of course bread, sour cheese, raisins, figs, and the small black olives of Judea. It also held the smooth stones he shot from his sling. The shepherd had a gourd or jar containing his supply of water or sour milk. His staff had no crook. It was a straight pole, about six feet long, slender at one end and a little thicker at the other end. He carried a “rod”. We would call it a “club”. It was a piece of hard heavy wood, about 18 inches long, with one end shaped to fit comfortably in the palm of his hand. It was a formidable weapon. (Another general consensus was that the staff had a crook—our props have crooks.)

Every shepherd had a sling. It was commonly made of woven goat's hair, though occasionally leather was used. The sling was made from a

small pouch of leather that could securely hold about one and one-half inches in diameter. The pouch was attached to two cords of sinew, rope, or leather about two feet long. The stone was placed into the pouch and the sling whirled about that the stone was held in place by centrifugal force. When one of the strings was released, the stone would leave the pouch with tremendous force. It was a deadly apparatus, used with fantastic accuracy. (There will be no need for stones during this presentation.)

There was often a musician among the band of shepherds. He carried a set of reed pipes he had whittled himself. It was made from two hollowed-out pieces of cane. The sound was made by blowing across a sharp edge and the notes were controlled by blocking off holes with fingers in each tube. In the evening hours, he would entertain his comrades. It was the practice of shepherds to divide the night into “watches”. As seamen do. They took turns “standing watch”. Their business was to protect their flocks. Sometimes, marauders or wanderers would try to steal some of the sheep. More frequently they were attacked by wild animals. If one of these ravenous beasts succeeded in killing a sheep, it was pursued. If possible, it was destroyed, and the portion of the sheep that was left was recovered (KJV Amos 3:12).

It was during one of these “watches” that “the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone about them.” (KJV Luke 2:9) with a brightness so intense the lustrous Syrian stars dim as the sky became a burning amethyst. Everything had a patina of light such as the Shepherds had never seen before. “And they were so afraid.” Their lambent eyes popped out. The first words of the angel had to be “Fear Not!” It is no wonder that the prelude to the proclamation was a clear call to abandon fear for, as one of the New Testament writers puts it, Jesus was born to deliver those who through fear all their lifetime subject to bondage. (KJV _____2:5) The angel of the Lord came upon them. The angel said to them “I bring you good tidings”. Not Herod. Not Caesar. Not the High Priest. But **Shepherds**—men who were excommunicated by the official religion of the land because of their calling. To them—men who were “untouchables”—the Lord’s message to them.

That is why they said to one another, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is to come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us (KJV Luke 2:15) This statement carries with it an

urgency which might be paraphrased, “Let us dash straight across to Bethlehem”. They did not care if they went the hard way, so long as it was the quickest way. They were in a hurry. As you see them hurrying off to David’s City, they seem to be filled with a boldness which makes them the pioneers of a new courage. A New Testament writer defines it for us: it is “boldness to draw near” (Hebrew 10:19ff).

Tid-Bit Information: Bethlehem is a small village, 5-6 miles south of Jerusalem. Land is hilly—with lots of rocks. Temperature can be 25 to 75 degrees. May through October no rain and December through March is the rainy season. On the road to Bethlehem you would see scrubby trees—oak, cedar, olive, and myrtle are some. Most people walk to Bethlehem from Jerusalem on a narrow winding road. One could possibly travel 15 miles on a good day. They would never travel on the Sabbath. Roads from Jericho to Jerusalem were very treacherous, steep, narrow, and lots of places for robbers to hide. In Bethlehem you could find many beggars too. Just east of Bethlehem you can see the white and chalky wilderness of Judea.

CENSUS: the Romans started the census system shortly before Jesus’ birth. They require registration every 14 years. People were required to return to the place of their birth to get their property registered so Rome would know how much tax would be charged. The Roman soldiers would be intolerant of the fanatical Jews—but tolerant of the quiet Jew. They can compel anyone to carry their burden for one mile. **Jewish Marketplace:** Narrow streets, noisy, aggressive sellers, smelly. Bartering is the way to buy—don’t walk up and pay the first price. Food in the marketplace comes in from local areas. Spices and citrus fruit are shipped in and more expensive. Have olive oil for lamps, cooking, and medicine, bread, vegetables, and fruit. No corn around in the 1st century. **CUSTOMS:** Business as property transfers, marriages, etc. was transacted at the village gate. The Elders sat on benches there. The **SYNAGOGUE** is a place of learning. Scribes are experts of law and instruct in the synagogue. Priests serve in the Temples ONLY—there was no Temple in Bethlehem. Women didn’t have equal rights—only in work. They worked in the fields alongside men. Women and girls were not forbidden in

synagogue but were held to the back. Houses were small but always had a guest room—even tents had guest rooms. Animals often housed under or near houses—often goats and sheep come into the city at night. A farm would be the size of 4-6 acres. Most families kept a goat or two to milk, a few sheep for wool, and one or two donkeys or oxen as draft animals. Chickens or other fowl were in the courtyard.

COINS OF THE TIMES: Roman coins-silver **denarius** (plural is denarii) was wages for 1 day of common labor. Greek coins-**drachma** is about the same as a denarius. Double drachma was used for paying the Temple tax. (No temple in Bethlehem) so this is why they would need money changers. Jewish coin- **lepta** (translated the same as mite) is small in value (fraction of a penny) It would take about 80 lepta to equal 1 denarius. **Shekel** is an Old Testament term and it is possible to be used as a weight of silver or gold (4-5 oz). Herod had his own coins too. In Old Testament times people bought either by exchanging goods or by paying an agreed weight of silver or gold, for instance, a shekel is a weight, not a unit of currency. **Talent** was equal to 3,000 shekels.

INTERACTION WITH GUIDE AND GUESTS: as a group approaches, the Guide appreciates it if you invite them to warm themselves by your fire. (The Guide will move to a position where the Trumpeter can see the swing of his/her lantern—which is a signal for the angels.) There will be a little time for conversation before the angels appear.

How far to Bethlehem?

Questions about the family?

Weather in Bethlehem and the area?

As the Trumpeter speaks, Shepherd's reaction is to be complete surprise and fear. Some may gasp and kneel, "Praise to the Lord" with complete attention to the speaker and singers.

Immediately after the song is finished, shepherds should show amazement one to another and make plans to go to Bethlehem “to see this thing that has happened”. There could be discussion on why Bethlehem was chosen for the birth of a Savior, why a baby and not a King, etc. Some shepherds could discuss this with the guests, but also be making arrangements among themselves to go quickly. Perhaps one could agree to stay with the sheep and the others start to leave. Guide will suggest their group will go quickly too.