

A Christmas Blessing **Christmas Eve**

In the middle of the night, the shepherds were notified by a presence who terrified them, a heavenly messenger who was then backed up by hallelujahs from a suddenly materializing celestial army.

I imagine the shepherds may have felt, at that moment, much the same way that the guards would, 30 years later, when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary had gone to see the tomb of Jesus, and all of a sudden there was an earthquake, and an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.

“For fear of him, the guards shook,” says Matthew, “and became like dead men.

“But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid.’”ⁱ

Those guards represented the powerful might of dominant force, secured by military strength and backed up by governmental resources designed to ensure stability and economic prosperity for those who had the privilege of citizenship in the empire.

That’s me: born not by any means into wealth, but born into several demographic privileges, including United States citizenship, that gave me and most of the people in my immediate circles all the opportunities we needed to find our way and even—whatever this may mean in any given circumstance—to “succeed.”

“That ain’t the shepherds”—that level of privileged position resulting from the fortunate particulars of birth.

Nor does it describe the women who came to see the tomb where the body of tonight’s newborn baby was laid to rest as the brutalized body of an adult man.

Living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night, the angel of the Lord stood before the shepherds, and they were terrified. And the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid.”ⁱⁱ

They went and found the mangy feed trough where a newborn infant was lying in bands of cloth, and they knew.

The dominant, powerful and militant guards outside the tomb would see and hear for themselves, tremble with fear, and become like dead men.

Those who are not so accustomed to being in manufactured or coincidental positions of strength also see and hear for themselves; also tremble with fear—maybe they even feel like they’re scared to death.

But in their vulnerability, in their lower and lesser status, they are drawn to see how God makes life, even from nothing—

even from death,
 even from displacement and dislocation
 and disappointment and hardship
 and the most bizarre and unpredictable
 and disorienting circumstances,

even from the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that we spend our lives trying to overcome, often without realizing

that it is our specific humanity—our humanness—that God comes to redeem and save;

that those who would be great should be servants of all;

that all those whose state of entitlement has fooled them into believing they always deserve to be first will in fact be the last—and vice versa;

that with God, nothing will be impossible.

In their weakness, they see that God makes life even from nothing, and they become alive again.

We are not the shepherds.

But because of the overpowering love of God, the all-encompassing love of Christ, maybe we, too, have the golden and blessed opportunity to be shaken into life, when we allow ourselves to look through and beyond all the trappings and diversions we devise to try to change the subject,

and truly come and see this thing which has taken place.

*He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.*

*He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.*

He did not wait

*till hearts were pure. In joy he came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came,
and his Light would not go out.*

*He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came
with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!ⁱⁱⁱ*

On this holy night and always,

“May the God of all mercy
Forgive you your sins,
Release you from suffering,
and restore you to wholeness and strength.”^{iv}

May the birth we celebrate this holy night
bring us hope, peace, joy, and love;

And may there always be room in the inn of our hearts
for the love of Jesus Christ,
in whose light we can accept, live with, and value
ourselves, our neighbors, and all God’s creation.

May you truly feel yourself to be at home with God tonight.

Amen.

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ⁱ Matthew 28:1-5

ⁱⁱ Luke 2:8-10

ⁱⁱⁱ Madeleine L’Engle, “First Coming,” in L’Engle, *A Cry Like a Bell (Wheaton Literary)*. Shaw Books, 2000.

^{iv} A traditional liturgy for the anointing with oil in the Service for Wholeness