

The Angels' Song

A favorite memory from my childhood Christmases with my grandparents in Chicago is arranging the nativity set under the tree. The scene included the usual figures



Michael Olmsted

of the holy family, shepherds, wise men, sheep, cows, plus cats, chickens, ducks and a dog. This mix of figures had come together as my grandmother was growing up. I still have two of the ducks that remind me how early I learned about the birth of Jesus.

As Luke records this extraordinary event, he startles us with the unlikely clash of the eternal with the ordinary, angels with shepherds. These shepherds from the hills around Bethlehem were invisible to the rest of the world. They raised sheep for food and wool, but they also raised lambs that were offered as sacrifices in the Temple and during the crowded feast of Passover.

Have you ever thought about the connection with Jesus who is “the lamb of God”? Those shepherds who endured the variables of weather and spent more time with sheep than with their families are the only people God’s angels appeared to on that starry night in Bethlehem. The Son of God, who is one with the Father and the light of this world, was born to a poor couple, in a barn and welcomed by men who smelled of sheep!

Grace is a truth that turns everything we know upside down. Jesus began his earthly life in an animal shed with shepherds and he ended his life crucified between two criminals.

We describe the place of Jesus’ birth as a stable or barn, but there is no mention of any animals in the story. The practice of that day was that a family owning any animals might have a small addition on their house or even

a kind of cave or cellar dug under the house to shelter their valuable animals for safety or from bad weather. We hold on to the image of a stable because a “manger” is mentioned (v. 2). So, I give you permission to include a cow or rooster or duck in your nativity set, but put the manger in a prominent place because that is the identifying mark the angel told the shepherds to seek.

We have read the beautiful words of Mary’s song as she surrenders her life to God and the passionate song of Zechariah as he affirms God’s promise to send our Redeemer. Now we listen as the angels of God’s heavenly court sing an anthem to the eternal God who sends his only begotten Son to give us everlasting life.

This is unequalled joyous news for our suffering world. You might expect God would send Christ into this world in a magnificent display of light surrounded by legions of angels, but Jesus comes as a helpless baby, cradled on a bed of straw with only his parents and some scruffy shepherds as witnesses. Yes, the magi will come along a bit later. But even in that incongruous nativity scene the angels of heaven will not be silent. There is joy in the appearance of the angels and a symphony of celebration beyond what human ears have ever heard. There is joy in the angels appearing and a celebration that will no be completed until the day Christ returns to call his church home and create new heaven and earth filled with the goodness and blessings of God.

Instead of bemoaning the crass commercialism of Christmas or making the usual remarks about schemes to remove Christ from Christmas in America, how about capturing the joy of the angels’ song? I have just heard a news report that Starbucks has been accused of ignoring the meaning of Christmas by making their holiday cups solid red instead of using their usual

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holiday symbols! Oh my! Could those of us who follow Christ channel our thinking and emotions into the meaning of that star-filled night when God came into the world, amazing both angels and shepherds? As a child I laid on my stomach studying the nativity scene under my grandparents’ Christmas tree, trying to understand the magic and commonplace joined in that stable. Today, I continue to marvel as I think about Jesus’ birth and hum some of Handel’s “Messiah.” Instead of worrying about commercialism and dark plots against Christmas, we should be singing and celebrating the coming of Christ.

We are overdue some joy. Every time you turn on the news or check your inbox there is plenty of violence and anger. Christians need to be producing good news bulletins in our words and actions. Joy is not limited to angel choruses. We need to connect with hope and possibilities. God has always understood this is something we cannot manufacture, so he did something about it.

Examine the narratives about Jesus and you find him spending most of his time with disadvantaged and suffering people, instead of the rich and religious. We note that even at his birth the first witnesses are lowly shepherds instead of scholars and priests. No matter your standing in the opinions of our world, there is a deep need for love, hope and meaning. God surprises us with joy, not good luck, prosperity or ego gratification. In the birth of Jesus, God says this is how much I love you.... I give you myself! No wonder the angels sang! Shall we join their chorus?

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.