

Family Talk for Christmas Day, 2020

Shepherds and Angels

A Family Talk by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn
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There were two groups of people that the Word talks about at the time the Lord was born: Shepherds and Angels. These two groups of people seem very different. A shepherd is someone who takes care of sheep. Angels are people who live in heaven and serve the Lord. But shepherds and angels have something in common. We'll talk about that after I read the story to you:

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

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, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:8-14)

So there were shepherds out at night with the sheep. This was a time when they did not have electricity, so night-time would have been very dark. Out in the darkness there were scary animals who wanted to get to the sheep. So a shepherd's job was to protect the sheep from scary animals. One way he would do this was with his staff. He could use this staff as a weapon to fight off lions and bears. Now they wouldn't fight other people like you or I might with a stick. Their staff was only for protecting, not attacking. And they did need to be strong fighter. You might remember that King David started life as a shepherd; and when King Saul doubted his ability to fight the giant Goliath, David said that he had fought against lions and bears, and won with the Lord's help! So shepherds, although we don't usually think of it, were strong, fierce, almost warrior-like protectors.

Then we come to the angels. We think of angels as being sweet, pleasant, smiling people. And they are that. But they are more than that. The angels that appeared to the shepherds are called the heavenly host. We don't use the word host much anymore, but it means army. So these angels were members of the Lord's heavenly army. It doesn't say what weapons they had, but maybe they had swords and other weapons and armour. They were soldiers for the Lord. A sword, more than a shepherd's staff, seems like something that was made to hurt. But in the hands of an angel, a sword would only ever be used to protect those who cannot protect themselves. They never attack, only defend. This is what makes shepherds and heavenly armies similar: they are strong and fierce, but they only ever use their strength to protect.

There is a reason that at the first Christmas when Jesus was born as a tiny little baby, there were shepherds and angels. These are the protectors that help those who are little and helpless, like babies. Now you don't have staffs and swords to fight with. But you too can be shepherds and warriors for the Lord this Christmas. You do that anytime you protect someone who cannot protect themselves. You do it

when you defend people who are getting hurt. You do it when you stand up for what is right. You also do it when you fight to protect the good things inside of yourself: when you say, "I will *not* be unkind, I will *not* hurt others, I will *not* lie, and so on." These are real battles that you have in your mind and heart. It takes a strong shepherd or angel warrior to win these battles. You are all shepherds and warriors for the Lord. Remember to use the power He gives you to *always* protect, never to destroy.

For the adults I want to dive a little deeper into where that power comes from, that is represented in both shepherds and angels. In the Word, these both stand for truth from the Lord. The power of truth can be seen in the immense power that angels have, as shown in this passage from the Teachings of the New Church:

What truth in its power is must also be stated briefly. In the Word angels are called 'powers'; and it is also well known in the Church that they are such. Yet they are not powers by virtue of anything their own, only by virtue of the Lord; for they are recipients of Divine truth which is from the Lord. The power they have from the Lord is such that one of them can drive away a thousand of the devil's crew, confine them to the hells, and keep them in check. For Divine truth which is from the Lord fills the heavens and forms them; and if you are willing to believe it, all things were made and created through that truth. (*Secrets of Heaven* §9410:5)

If that is the power of a single angel, imagine a whole host, an army of angels. That is the power of truth that the Lord brought with Himself when He was born into the world. The power to overcome all of hell, no matter what hell throws our way. It can all be overcome with the Lord's truth. Without that power we would be lost, especially at a time like now, when we need to cling to the Lord's truth more than ever.

But the Lord did not just give abstract truth, nor does abstract truth, devoid of goodness, have any power. This is where the representation of the shepherds comes in. Shepherds stand for people who teach the truth; but not only that, who by teaching truth, lead to goodness. In explaining the importance of truth leading to good, the Teachings of the New Church make clear the point of truth:

What is the use of faith, that is, what is the use of knowledge, awareness, and doctrine related to faith, other than of becoming such as it teaches? The first thing faith teaches is charity, Mark 11:28-35; Matt. 22:35-40, charity being the goal of everything faith has in view. If a person does not become as it teaches, what is knowledge or doctrine but something which is in fact nothing? (*Secrets of Heaven* §344)

Anyone who has learned about the life of Jesus knows that He did not merely *teach* truth. He lived and became what He taught. In this way truth takes on its real power to protect and guard.

Because when truth leads to good, it does guard and protect. It is like a parent who teaches his child right from wrong; who teaches them so they will be safe and protected not only from the threats of the world, but also safe and protected from spiritual harm; who teaches so that the child is best prepared for a happy and good life. In the same way the Lord came into the world to provide His life giving truth that might protect and guard us spiritually.

This Christmas, and as 2020 comes to a close, what truth from the Lord do you want to hold on to? What truth will guard and protect you from all the forces of hell? A few that come to mind for me, as I think of our current situation, are:

- That the Lord is in charge, over all things, great and small;
- That I am not in charge, and only need take responsibility for what the Lord has given me;
- That nothing is allowed to happen unless some good can come of it;
- That despair and hardship are temporary, while even the smallest act of goodness persists to eternity;
- That 2000 years ago, spiritual darkness was greater and more pervasive than at any time since; and yet the Lord, through His birth and life, overcame even that.

As mere ideas these truths are brittle and weak. But when we take them to heart and truly live them, they serve as powerful protection against the lies of hell, that try to drown us in despair. I hope this Christmas you can find that one truth from the Lord that will give you power over evil, and power to do good.

We will end this service in prayer. I will share a few words, and I invite you to reflect on them in your own way. There will then be a minute of silent prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ, we thank You for Your birth on this earth, to live among us, teaching truth, yes, but also becoming truth itself in human form, so that we might have a template to follow in our own lives.

Lord, you know that this time of joy has been dampened by the ongoing pandemic. The direct threat to the health of many, and the indirect result of shuttered businesses, rising anxiety, struggling marriages and parents, and overstretched workers weighs heavily on our hearts and minds.

Lord, be with the leaders of our country and our communities; give them wisdom to make good decisions. Be with the frontline workers who put themselves on the line for the sake of the good of all. Be with all who are struggling with mental health issues, give them love and comfort. Be with those with financial burdens, alleviating their natural concerns but also granting them a view of spiritual blessings. Be with those who have lost loved ones, and grant them the comfort of knowing that you keep them in Your care. Be with those who frustrate and irritate us, especially when we are stressed, and be with us in learning to forgive and to love even our enemies. Give us hope that your angelic armies continue to guard and protect the goodness within our hearts and in the world at large. May we take to heart the words of the angel so many years ago:

Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

We will now have a time for silent prayers.

Amen.