

December 20-24, 2021 Edition

Surviving The Holidays #4
The Nativity Experience-
The Shepherds Wonder

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

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Monday Reflection: This week as we move towards Christmas Day we are going to take a look at the shepherds- one of the groups that plays a huge role in the Nativity story. It doesn't seem that strange to you and me- all of our lives we've heard about the role the shepherds played. We've sung songs about the shepherds. We've seen movies and cartoons and even nativity scenes that prominently featured the shepherds. It doesn't seem strange to us at all that the shepherds were there.

But it would have seemed strange to the people reading this story in the first century.

Luke is the only gospel writer to mention the shepherds. Why does he mention them when nobody else does? Interesting question (at least it is to me ;o). To understand that we've got to step back and look at why Luke was written in the first place. Why did Luke write his gospel and then his history of the early church? He kind of tells us in the opening lines of his gospel:

Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write an accurate account for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught. Luke 1:1-4 (NLT)

The biggest obstacle to understanding who Theophilus is that last word in the passage above, "taught". It makes it sound like he's a disciple who wanted to learn more about Jesus. That may be why Luke wrote but I don't think so anymore. I'm starting to think Luke wrote his gospel and the book of the Acts Of The Apostles as a sort of cover letter so that the magistrate who was handling Paul's trial in Rome would be able to better understand the letters that Paul wrote/was writing. This theory answers so many questions for me including why Luke wants to make sure and feature the shepherds right off the bat.

In the ancient world shepherds were at the bottom of the social barrel as it were. They were considered to be the sketchiest, least reliable and most untrustworthy group imaginable. They were one of only two classes of citizens in the first century who could not testify in court. Their testimony was considered entirely unreliable. If you murdered someone in front of 100 witnesses in the first century the only way you could hope to get away with it was if the 100 witnesses were all shepherds. They couldn't testify against you.

And yet God comes to this group of people that are considered to be the least reliable and that He knew nobody would listen to and He basically says, "hey guys, I want you to go and bear witness to what I'm up to over there in Bethlehem. My Son was born today and you guys will basically be the only witnesses other than a woman who is running from a scandal and her peasant husband."

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Luke 2:8 (NLT)

Doesn't make much sense, does it? Why does Luke tell us about then? I mean if you were trying to come up with a story that would change the world you would never use shepherds as the reliable witnesses who were asked to testify to the birth of your leader. But God has never paid much attention to human wisdom. We are always messing up His plans for treating each other the way we should. And so he calls on the least likely candidates to be witnesses of the birth of His Son.

So how does all of this fit into the idea that the gospel of Luke is a cover letter for a Roman magistrate who will decide if Paul lives or dies? If a Roman magistrate was reading the gospel of Luke he'd get to chapter 2 and realize that this new "religion" was doomed. There's a shady history and scandal surrounding the conception of Jesus. There's the fact that they're Jewish. And now you're telling me shepherds are the witnesses of the birth? I guess we've got nothing to fear from this lunatic and his silly religion. There's no way it'll last.

But it has. For almost 2000 years now and here we are in 2021 with people naming their kids Mary and Martha and Luke and Peter and Paul and we are naming our dogs Caesar and Brutus and Nero. So when your own story starts to not make sense don't be too alarmed- God works well in what we consider to be chaos and weakness.

Tuesday Reflection: By the time Jesus was born the Jews had been expecting their Messiah to come for over 60 years. Because of a prophecy in the book of Daniel the Jews expected God to send His Messiah during the time that the Romans (the 4th empire of Nebuchadnezzar's dream that Daniel interpreted) ruled Israel. I grew up thinking the Jews had been expecting Messiah for hundreds or even thousands of years but it just isn't so. People get tired of waiting for that long for something that they believe to be "imminent".

That's why when Jesus is born and when He eventually dies on the cross the people of Israel are eagerly anticipating the coming King of kings. It wasn't just Daniel's prophecy- there were hundreds of prophecies concerning the Messiah that every Jew knew by heart. Here's one of them:

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. Malachi 3:1 (NLT)

Notice how God paints this picture. He says He will send a messenger to prepare the way and when the time is right He will come "suddenly". That's generally how God works in this world- the preparation time is excruciatingly long and slow (to us) and we start to wonder if He's ever going to act. Ever feel that way in your own life? Then you have a pretty good idea of how the Jews of first century Israel felt. What is taking so long? Why doesn't He hurry up? Did I do something wrong so He's making me wait longer? Did someone else do something wrong so He's making us wait longer? Or maybe there's a problem with (gulp) God?

If you've ever had those thoughts and felt that way then first of all, join the club. Every single one of us who have ever lived have had those thoughts and feelings.

Every. Single. One.

So yeah, it's not unusual. You're not some terrible human being (at least not for those thoughts- what do I know, maybe you are a terrible human being but it's not because you had those

thoughts ;o). We all have those thoughts and feelings. So what do we do? Well, we can learn something from the Shepherds of Luke chapter 2. This week we'll walk in their footsteps and try to understand this incredibly familiar story in a not so familiar way but let me leave you with another prophecy from the Old Testament to think about today- a prophecy having to do with God's timing:

But these things I plan won't happen right away. Slowly, steadily, surely, the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. If it seems slow, do not despair, for these things will surely come to pass. Just be patient! They will not be overdue a single day! Habakuk 2:3 (TLB)

God promises He won't be hurried. He promises that He is at work even when it doesn't feel like it. And He promises that when His plans are ready to be unveiled in our lives it will happen quickly. I have to confess that often when I'm waiting for God to act I spend a lot of time whining about waiting. Why is it taking so long? Does God even care that I'm drowning down here? What's going on???? Then when God's preparations are finished and it's time for Him to act I'm usually screaming (screaming internally but screaming nonetheless) for God to SLOW DOWN!!! You're going too fast! Don't You realize I'm not ready yet?!?!?!?

God must feel like He just can't win with me. Maybe you can relate. If so let's pray for each other that we'll both have the patience to wait while God sets everything up and then the courage to move forward when the time is right and God's ready for us to move.

Wednesday Reflection: Ok so I think we can learn at least three things from the Shepherds of the Nativity story that will help us to be patient while waiting for God to act and then courageous enough to move forward with Him when the time comes. So what were the shepherds doing on the night Jesus was born? The same thing they'd been doing for at least 600 years in Bethlehem- they were watching:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. Luke 2:8 (NIV)

On the night Jesus was born the shepherds of Bethlehem were keeping watch. I know Luke mentions that they were keeping watch over their flocks but they were watching for more than just wild animals or bandits that they knew they had to protect their flocks from- they were also keeping watch for the Messiah. Why do I say they'd been keeping watch for at least 600 years? Because that's how old the prophecy was. What prophecy, you ask? This one:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel, whose origins are in the distant past, will come from you on my behalf. Micah 5:2 (NLT)

The prophecy that promised where the Messiah would be born. He would be born in Bethlehem. Which was strange. I mean Bethlehem in the first century was a no-nothing backwater of a town. Sure, it was where King David was from but the town of David didn't really get much of a rise in stature just because it was David's home town. In the first century it was a village of probably around 200 people. It wasn't on any of the Roman roads so it didn't get much traffic. If

you were in Bethlehem it was because you were going to Bethlehem- nobody ended up there just because.

And because of its out-of-the-way nature and its proximity to Jerusalem (about 6 miles) Bethlehem was a perfect place for shepherding. It still is. As I traveled through Israel I never saw so many sheep as when we were in and around Bethlehem. And that's it. That's Bethlehem's only claims to fame- hometown of King David, lots of sheep and the prophesied birth place of the Messiah.

And these shepherds knew it. They were expecting the Messiah to come at any time (probably sooner rather than later most of Israel believed in the first century). And so they weren't just keeping watch over their flocks- they were also keeping watch for the coming of the foretold Messiah who would deliver them from their bondage. And on this night they would finally see what they had kept watch over for since Rome had conquered them- the birth of the long awaited Savior.

So what does all of that have to do with us? Well, I'd imagine you're waiting for God to do something just like those shepherds were. I know I am. Waiting for God to step in and make everything "right". I've got my list of stuff I want to see God do and I know you have your own list. God expects us to be keeping watch, patiently and expectantly waiting on Him to intervene and bring His salvation and redemption into our lives and the lives of those we love.

So until He acts we'll keep watch together trusting that He knows what He's doing- even when it doesn't feel much like it to those of us who are waiting. Thank God He's more patient with us than we are with Him.

Thursday Reflection: Ok so the second thing we learn from the shepherds in this story is that they weren't just watching- they were waiting. Waiting AND watching. Now you might be thinking, "duh, Pastor Ed! Of course they were waiting while they were watching. You can't do it any other way! If you're watching like you described the shepherds were doing then they by definition also had to be waiting."

Not necessarily.

The Bible has a different definition of waiting than we usually do. For me, waiting can be either passive or assertive. Take this verse for instance:

Those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength, they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary. Isaiah 40:31 (NASB)

I don't know about you but when I would hear this verse while I was growing up I would think of waiting as patiently sitting around twiddling my thumbs while I "waited" for God to show up and do His thing. That's not Biblical waiting. Biblical waiting is being patient while actively doing everything else I already know God wants me to be doing knowing that unless I do my part God's plan will not come to pass. Why not? Because His plan is usually contingent upon my growth and participation in order to be fulfilled.

So with that in mind read that verse from Isaiah one more time:

Those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary. Isaiah 40:31 (NASB)

What does it look like to “wait for the Lord”? It means I worship while I wait. I serve while I wait. I learn while I wait. I grow while I wait. Get the picture? The promise from this verse is that if I “wait” doing all the things I already know God wants me to be doing then God will give me “new strength”. This is not strength I never knew I had- this is strength I never had before. Strength that only God can give me. It’s why learning to “wait on the Lord” is so important. Until I get better at waiting I will never get stronger. And I don’t know about you but I could use some new strength in my life right about now.

The shepherds knew this and so they didn’t just keep watch for the coming of the Messiah- they patiently waited doing everything they already knew God wanted them to do until the Messiah came. That meant tending the flocks of Bethlehem (a very special flock as it turns out and we’ll talk more about that tomorrow) while they anticipated the long awaited Savior:

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 that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord." Luke 2:9-11 (NIV)

And just like that the shepherds watching and waiting was over. The Messiah had been born in Bethlehem of all places! Just like God had said. It is just one more example of God’s faithfulness. If He says He’s going to do something then you can take it to the bank- He’s going to do that thing- but it will probably take longer than you or I would appreciate.

But this is how God works. With time plus miraculous grace. The time is a necessity. God won’t very often bypass the natural progression of time. Why not? I’m not sure- I guess He’s a big fan of time. He uses it in how He works in human history very much like He designed it to work in a woman’s pregnancy. Paul put it like this:

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Galatians 4:4-5 (NIV)

Here Paul is describing how God went about bringing the Rescuer (the Messiah) promised WAY BACK in Genesis chapter 3. Could God have just dropped Jesus into the Garden of Eden and saved the world that way? Maybe. Maybe not. All I know is He didn’t. He spent thousands of years setting everything up so and when the time was “full” God sent His Son. That word, “full” is the word that was used to describe the time for a baby to come. After 9 months of everything being set in motion giving a baby everything it needed to survive when it was time people would say a woman’s pregnancy was “full”. Her fullness of time had come. Paul uses that concept to describe Jesus being born. It wasn’t just about Mary’s pregnancy coming to fullness but also about the world’s birthing pains being full. And when everything was ready (for Mary, baby Jesus and the world) God sent His Son.

And nothing has been the same since. So now what? We know what happened but what does any of this have to do with you and me? Well, now we’re awaiting Jesus’ return. The Bible doesn’t exactly say it but I imagine the same thing is true now as it was when the baby Jesus

was born- God's waiting to send His Son back a second time until the "fullness of time" has come. What are you and I to be doing until then? Waiting and watching. Doing everything we already know we're supposed to be doing (worshiping, serving, loving the unlovable, accepting the unacceptable, forgiving the unforgivable... you get the picture, right?) while patiently awaiting Jesus' return or our own eventual promotion to heaven while the rest of the world waits for Jesus' return.

So what are you "waiting for"? See what I did there? Sometimes I slay myself. But you see where I'm going with this, don't you? Today let's both spend some time thinking about what we're not doing (that we know we're supposed to be doing) while we "wait on the Lord".

Friday Reflection: Merry Christmas Eve!!!! I'm so happy that our reflections on the shepherds have brought us to this amazing day- the day that is written about in so many beautiful songs. Maybe my favorite is this line from O Holy Night:

Long lay the world in sin and error pining. Til He appeared and the soul felt its worth.

No truer words have ever been sung. On that very first Christmas Eve the shepherds were watching and waiting and then it happened- He appeared in human form and God wanted these shepherds to bear witness to the most important moment in human history up until that point.

And it happened in Bethlehem. Bethlehem?!?!? And God chose shepherds to bear witness. Shepherds???? Yes. Shepherds.

In the first century shepherds were at the very bottom of the social ladder. They were despised and distrusted. We spent some time Monday reflecting on the social status of shepherds and on Wednesday we talked about the humble nature of the village of Bethlehem. Why did God choose to do it this way? Because God is nothing if not humble. He chooses the most unlikely of places and people to accomplish His plans. And maybe that more than anything else is why we learn one more thing from the shepherds- they watched, they waited and when God showed up they wondered.

Now I don't mean wonder like in curiosity. Sure that was probably there as well but what I mean for this reflection is that they were filled with wonder- they were wondering. As the angel spoke to them they were wondering. As the angel choir lit up the sky and filled the world with heavenly music they were wondering. As they made their way to see the baby they were wondering.

And that brings us to a very interesting question- how did they know where to go to find the baby? The Wise Men had a star to follow but the Bible never mentions the shepherds seeing this star. The Wise Men come months later (possibly as much as 2 years later but we'll talk about them in next week's reflections) following the star of Bethlehem but the shepherds find the baby another way. How?

The angel gave them directions. We'll get more into what those directions were tomorrow (another Saturday reflection? Yes!) but first lets talk about what conditions Jesus was actually born in. We all know the story- the crowded streets of Bethlehem. The inn with a "No Vacancy" sign out front. A grumpy inn keeper who callously sends the pregnant mother to the barn. But is that the way it really happened.

Probably not.

So how did it happen? Well I have two working theories and we'll focus on the first today and the second one tomorrow. Let's dive in, shall we? When Mary & Joseph arrive in Bethlehem this is what we are told:

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in the manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:7 (ESV)

Seems to support the tradition with the grumpy inn keeper and a barn, doesn't it? But that's only because of a mis-translation. When the Bible was first translated into English the King James translators incorrectly used the word "inn". They were doing their best but they had less information to go on than modern translators due to archaeological evidence found in the last 500 years. It turns out that word that older translations translate as "inn" is the greek word kataluma. It doesn't mean inn- it means guest room. Look at modern translations and you'll see that this verse has been corrected:

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room (kataluma) available for them. Luke 2:6-7 (NLT)

So what's a kataluma? It's an upper room that most first century homes in Israel had just in case the need to house a traveler arose. Hospitality was one of the most important parts of a Jew's life. It was so important they built it into the very architecture of their homes. The kataluma was usually an upper room that in ordinary circumstances was used for storage but if family or a traveler showed up it was where a Jewish family put the visitors to sleep. It was kind of like a loft. If you're interested in what it looked like you can watch the lesson from the weekend of December 18/19 where I used quite a few pictures from my trip to the Holy Land.

The kataluma wasn't an inn- it was a guest room. In fact the word kataluma is only used one other time in the New Testament and it's found at the end of Luke's gospel:

So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us... when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters and tell the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room (kataluma), where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished; prepare it there." And they went and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover. Luke 22:8-13 (ESV)

If you've spent much time in church you've heard of the "upper room" where Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with His disciples. That kataluma would have been huge (the people who shared their home with Jesus that night were wealthy) but the one that was already full when Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem would have been small and humble. But it was full. And so Mary and Joseph are offered an alternative.

So how is this much different, you ask. They still get sent to the barn, right? Wrong. There was another feature of first century Jewish homes that we haven't talked about yet- the basement. In ancient times a family's wealth was tied up in their livestock. There were no banks, no 401ks. No stock market. A family mainly had their wealth tied up in animals. So at the end of the day they wouldn't leave their livestock outside- they brought them inside the house with them and kept them in the basement. Bethlehem is built on a hill with lots of caves. People would use the

natural cave formations as basements and would build on top of the cave incorporating it into their architecture (again if you want to have an idea of what that might have looked like watch the lesson on the shepherds from December 18/19, 2021).

Almost assuredly it was in one of these caves that Jesus was born. Not sent out into the cold night to be born in a barn but in the basement of a house where the guest room was full so the family made room in what was undoubtedly the warmest, most cozy part of the home. Were there animals there? Sure. Was there a manger there? Absolutely. But Jesus was almost certainly not born in a cold, uncaring place with nobody to help his poor mom and dad out. He was born in the basement of a home where Joseph's family could help and support the holy family as the most momentous moment in human history (up to that point in time) took place.

And when the shepherds arrived they were filled with wonder. So were Mary and Joseph. And I imagine, so were the people who so lovingly shared their basement with the family from Nazareth whose baby would change the world.

No wonder they were wondering.

Saturday (Christmas Day!!!) Reflection: Merry Christmas everybody!!! We will finish our reflections on the shepherds today by looking at another theory as to where Jesus might have been born. Sure we all know He was born in Bethlehem but where exactly in Bethlehem was He born? Great question. Yesterday we talked about the "kataluma" or guest room. Kataluma has been mistranslated as "inn" for almost 500 years and our culture is steeped in the idea of Jesus being born in a barn- but He almost assuredly was not. He almost assuredly was born in the basement (or personal stable) of a beloved family member.

So what's this alternate theory? I'm so glad you asked. The answer revolved around the shepherds of Bethlehem. There is a very good possibility these shepherds weren't just any rando shepherds. As it turns out there was a very special group of shepherds in the first century (and in every century prior to that going back at least 600 years) that cared for a very special flock of sheep.

But before we get to them let's talk about the date of Jesus' birth. Have you ever heard someone say Jesus couldn't have been born on December 25th? That December 25th was chosen by emperor Constantine as the date to celebrate Jesus's birth because that was right around the time of the Roman festival of Saturnalia. That Jesus couldn't have been born in December because there wouldn't have been any shepherds watching their flocks in the fields around Bethlehem in the middle of winter.

Well as it turns out, it's quite possible Jesus was actually born on December 25th. In the second century a man named Hyppolytus wrote that Jesus birthday was in fact December 25th. He wrote this about 150-200 years before Rome declared that day to be Christmas Day. Ok, so what about the shepherds in the fields watching their sheep? Didn't you say that there wouldn't have been any shepherds with flocks in the fields around Bethlehem in December. Yes, I did. Ok so what's the deal?

Typical shepherds would have taken their flocks south for the winter where it would be warmer. But there was one very special flock that never moved from the fields around Bethlehem- the Temple Flock. The Temple Flock was a special flock that provided the unblemished, perfect lambs needed for the sacrifices at the Temple. Every day 2 perfect lambs were needed for the

morning and evening sacrifices. More would be needed for high holy days and on Passover alone scholars reckon that somewhere between 250,000 to 300,000 unblemished lambs were required. Where would the Temple priests find that many unblemished lambs?

Well they must have had issues with that at some point so some smart priest came up with the idea of having their own flock with their own specialized shepherds that would do more than just protect the sheep from predators and care for their ordinary needs- these shepherds would also keep the lambs "unblemished". From birth to sacrifice these sheep were tended to in a way no other sheep in the world were cared for. The sheep were grazed in Bethlehem because it was close to the Jerusalem (but not too close) at a place called Migdal Eder (the tower of the flock). It's a tower just outside of Bethlehem that you can still see the ruins of. The tower housed the priests who supervised the whole operation, the shepherds who personally cared for the sheep and any other support staff that might be needed.

The tower also had a kataluma- a guest room where visitors could be put up for a night or two (hospitality was a HUGE deal to the Jews and while the Jerusalem priests give the priesthood a black eye most priests were humble devoted followers of God who wanted nothing more than to please Him). Oh yeah, and the Migdal Eder also had a birthing room where the shepherds of the Temple flock would help a pregnant ewe give birth so that the lamb wouldn't be harmed during delivery or in the time after when a scratch or scuff would render it useless for Temple sacrifices.

So let's go back and look at what the angel says to the shepherds and the question, how did the shepherds know where to look for Jesus when the angel didn't appear to give them any specific directions:

This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger... Luke 2:12 (NLT)

The angel doesn't "appear" to give specific directions but what if we just missed them? What if the directions are there and the shepherds immediately know exactly where Joseph and Mary have gone to give birth to the Savior? In fact, I think they did. It's all in the sign the shepherds were given.

What is a sign? It's something that points the way. That directs us to something. The sign is not the thing itself. The sign only points and gives direction. For example, there's a sign on the Glenn Hwy as you approach Eagle River that says, "Hiland Road Exit". The sign has an arrow kind of pointing off to the right at an angle. What does that sign mean? It's pointing out that the south Eagle River exit is coming up and if that's what you're looking for get ready because that road you're wanting to travel on is coming up and if you're not careful you'll miss it. The sign isn't the road- it just points to the road.

Ok so let's talk about the sign the angel gives the shepherds. That sign is that they will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. I am starting to suspect that when the shepherds heard this they knew immediately exactly where to go- straight to the birthing room of Migdal Eder where when baby lambs were born they would be wrapped in (wait for it...) swaddling cloths to protect them from scratches and scuffs and then the baby lambs would be laid in (wait for it again.....) a manger so they couldn't hurt themselves.

I don't know about you but that blows my mind. The swaddling cloths that Jesus was wrapped in are mentioned 3 times in this story. It's almost like Luke wants us to remember above all what Jesus was wrapped up in and where He was laid. Why? Because it's another one of those foreshadows that illustrate Who Jesus is and what He's come to do. He would be the perfect sacrificial lamb Who takes away the sins of the world according to John The Baptist:

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! John 1:29 (NLT)

I believe that when the angel tells the shepherds what sign would lead them to Jesus they knew immediately exactly where to go. And not just because they knew that the birthing room of Migdal Eder had a manger and plenty of swaddling cloths to go around but also because of lesser known prophecy that they were probably aware of because of where they worked:

As for you, watchtower of the flock (Migdal Eder), stronghold of Daughter Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to Daughter Jerusalem. Micah 4:8 (NIV)

I'm not sure anyone else paid much attention to this particular prophecy but I guarantee you the shepherds who worked there watching the Temple Flocks knew about it. And they were watching and waiting for the day the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (which everybody knew about) quite possibly inside of the Tower Of The Flock (Migdal Eder) where the sacrificial lambs were birthed, wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger. And can you imagine the wonder they must have felt?

After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.... The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them. Luke 2:16-20 (NLT)

But it wasn't only the shepherds who were wondering (not wondering like curiosity but wondering like being filled with wonder that just won't stop) at all of this- everybody who heard what the shepherds had to say were wondering as well.

And now it's our turn. Are you filled with wonder at the humble but wonderful way God was at work in the world to bring His Son to us? Because if you're not then you've stopped paying attention. So let yourself be filled with wonder on this Christmas Day of 2021 when I have a feeling all of us could use a little wonder in our lives. And as we say goodbye to the shepherds let's take a look at the lyrics to one of my favorite Christmas Carols and see if maybe they strike you as poignantly as they do me today:

Oh holy night!
The stars are brightly shining
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth!
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till he appear'd and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!

Fall on your knees
Oh hear the angel voices
Oh night divine
Oh night when Christ was born
Oh night divine
Oh night divine

Led by the light of Faith serenely beaming
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming
Here come the wise men from Orient land
The King of Kings lay thus in lowly manger
In all our trials born to be our friend

Truly He taught us to love one another
His law is love and His gospel is peace
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother
And in His name all oppression shall cease
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we
Let all within us praise His holy name

Merry Christmas everybody.
Jesus is awesome!
May we all watch, wait and wonder with the shepherds.