

Let me read the Christmas story ... up to a point.

Saint Luke, chapter two, verse eight: "In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven..."

That's where I will end the reading. That's where we are. We are where the shepherds were when the angels left them and went back to heaven. It's been great. The **announcement** was spectacular. The angels were here; (you don't see angels every day.) It was awe-inspiring and it left us all in wonder when the angels came and made their announcement.

And then, the text reads, "When the angels had left them and gone into heaven..." It was great, but the angels have gone. Here we are with our fellow tenders of the pasture. We are brought together by what **we believe** God has told us through the angels. We are brought together by what **we believe** God has in store for us - what the angels promised we would find. That is what just happened and that is what we are promised will happen...but right now we are all standing here in the pasture and it looks a great deal like it did before any of this ever came up.

The experience was remarkable; the promise is exciting. **But - evidence?** We're here in the field, in the dark. One shape looks pretty much like another. Can we be sure we saw anything at all?

The feeling is fading fast. Signs and wonders do not have a long shelf life. We'd better encourage one another to go find more signs and wonders.

But the angel did not say the sign would be a wonder. The angel said, "This will be a sign for you. You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." A baby. A baby in poor circumstances.

The angels have gone back to heaven. And we're left standing in a dark field where we have stood many times before. And it smells like sheep, and we know all the other shepherds - maybe too well. **And, to overcome all of this ordinariness, we've only been promised a baby?**

I don't know if it's going to be enough. We start talking to each other. "Shouldn't there be some more angels, or halos, or maybe a talking cow? Something that would dress up the front of a Christmas card or we could sing about." "Maybe there will be a little drummer boy with a couple of baritones." "If I'm going to walk all the way into Bethlehem I want more than a baby."

Even if we trust ourselves enough to leave the sheep and go to Bethlehem - we may not be reassured. It will depend on us and what we find reassuring.

Are we only reassured by the spectacular? Nothing spectacular has been promised. No halos nor singing doves. The sign we have been promised is a baby, in a feed trough for cattle.

So, we go to Bethlehem. In the dark. Through all the dark shapes in the field. Maybe an angel, maybe a tree.

But we find it. It **is** what the angel promised, but it's a baby. Just a baby. We've had babies of our own. This shepherd's wife had a baby just last week and his mother-in-law told him that it was a lot better looking than anything this couple could come up with.

That scene with the angels, that was something, but this. Anybody can have a baby.

Is this supposed to be reassuring? I suppose it depends. What will reassure you? If things that are surprising and spectacular reassure you - you will be disappointed. **If God fulfilling his promise reassures you - this is the story for you.** God didn't promise halos. The angels said not one word about talking cows. God promised this sign. Here is the sign he promised.

We are the shepherds. The announcement is exciting and memorable. But the angels go back into heaven and we look for what they have promised.

If we need more sensational, other-worldly experiences to keep ourselves going...we will be disappointed. People often are. Especially at Christmas time when we celebrate the birth of the baby, people are so often disappointed.

People pin their hopes on celebrations, get-togethers, cards, and all of the other things we do to approximate the spectacular announcement of the angels... and those people are disappointed. The celebration of Christmas is just like the announcement of the angels. It is rare and it is exciting...but they are so excited about the **announcement** they forget what is being announced.

Like shepherds when the angels have gone back into heaven. **The Christ child is within walking distance**, but they are disappointed because the spectacular part is over.

Let's go to Bethlehem. Let's make our way through the dark shapes - which may be angels or may be trees...We can live with some ambiguity.

We have been promised there is a baby there in Bethlehem and we will not be disappointed. The baby is what God promised and it is just like the angel said.

It is so breathtakingly ordinary. A baby. If God is in **this** event, he will come in **all** events. If God went to all of this trouble with angels and wonders to turn up in a place as ordinary as a stable - there is **no** place he might not show up. - We're not safe from God anywhere.

I love to celebrate Christmas. The dazzling Christmas celebration has the same function as the angels back at the first Christmas. The celebration is unusual, like the angels, it gets our attention, and it often scares us. The celebration is the messenger; it is thrilling.

**But the *message* - the message you see everyday.**

The message is: God lives with his people. That is familiar. As wonderful as the Christmas celebration is, the message is that you will see the face of Christ. And the next time you **see** the face of Christ - it will look familiar. It will be the face of someone you work with. The face of Christ might be on someone making a request. You might be married to it.

And as wonderful as the Christmas celebration is, the message is that you will hear the call of God. And the next time you **hear** the call of God - it will sound familiar. It will be asking "Will you help?" "Will you listen?" "Will you come?"

And as wonderful as the Christmas celebration is, the message is that you can **serve** God. And the next time you are serving God - you will find yourself doing familiar things. Your job, your studies.

The message that God lives with his people is so familiar - as ordinary as the birth of a baby. The announcement gets our attention, but the message is with us every day. The celebration of Christmas is the announcement. It is beautiful and exciting and joyous.

We've seen the announcement. Now let's go see what they're talking about. When we find it, it may look ordinary. But it is nothing less than God coming into our lives.