

Episode: Journey to the Manger with Shepherds | The Third Week of Advent

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence; I beg your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Today, as we prepare for Christmas during this wonderful season of Advent, we have looked at some of the most stellar figures of our faith, so as to learn from their response to grace, their disposition and their readiness to be playing their role in the incarnation. Naturally. We started with the Blessed Virgin Mary, and then we moved on to her husband, St. Joseph. But now we have to move on to not an individual as such with a name, but to a small anonymous group that were the first ones to be informed about this miracle of God being born there in Bethlehem. This is the unnamed, indeed unknown, poor shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem.

We see them often in paintings surrounding these events of the birth of Christ, they were there in their shepherd- shepherd's garbs with their sheep. But even though they look like very secondary figures, we can learn a lot from them, you know, as soon as Luke recounts those tender moments in which Mary wraps her infant in these- these cloths- these bands of cloth. He tells us that she lays him in a manger, and as a result of that act, he's just- the child's been born, there's like a supernatural ripple effect. God himself has laid his head on the straw. He is wrapped up, this little child, who is God, is wrapped up, and this grace suddenly echoes around Mary and Joseph, but specifically to these shepherds who had the very important duty of watching over the sheep that would be used eventually for the sacrifice in the temple.

I'm sure we're aware of that marvelous account, as is recounted by St. Luke. He says this, "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 the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you. You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'" This was the sign that they received a child wrapped in bands of cloth- in swaddling cloth in a manger. Why would that be a sign to these shepherds? The Messiah is there -but why would the shepherds consider this as such a significant sign? Why would they say that this somehow fulfilled the prophecy of the Messiah? When they heard this, they

clicked, they understood, and we know that they- they went running to see and discover where Mary and Joseph were, and where the child was. Well, these weren't the ordinary run of the mill shepherds. They were lowly and poor, yes, but there was something unique and special about them. I mean, in general, the Bible has a lot of accounts of shepherds. I mean, you think Abraham was a shepherd, Jacob was a shepherd, Moses, David. So, well, this is not something that was looked down upon to be a shepherd, but specifically the ones in Bethlehem, we are- they're told- we are told that they were Levitical shepherds, that is, they were tasked with raising the sacrificial animals, the lambs, that would be sacrificed in the temple. And they knew what to do when one of their sheep gave birth to a lamb, especially if it was inclement weather, when things got kind of ugly, when the rain, it was cold, when they had to give birth to a lamb, they would go into one of these caves in Bethlehem, these places of refuge. And these caves would have been kept very clean in function of kind- of ritual purity. And that's where these lambs would have been born. And lambs that were born in Bethlehem were primarily used, not exclusively, but primarily, were used as the Passover lambs.

So when these Levitical shepherds arrived at this cave where Mary and Joseph had taken refuge, they saw the Messiah born in the very same place where the Passover lambs were going to be born, and where they had been before. They had seen these venerable caves before with their own lambs, but now, as they look, they don't see a lamb, they see this baby in the arms of Mary, and it suddenly dawns on them that this child is there because he came into this world to be the Lamb of God. And they were shepherds of these lambs, here is the Lamb of God, the Passover Lamb that was born to take away the sins of the world. But what is this mystery? The sign of swaddling cloths or bands of cloth? Or what is- why is that a sign for them? Well, remember how they had heard from the angel that a savior is born today in the city of David, the angel said, Who is Messiah, the Lord, and that will be a sign to you. You will find an infant wrapped in strips of cloth, or swaddling cloths, lying in the manger. Now, I understand that these swaddling cloths were actually a common practice for a long time, you know, baby- babies, they love to be swaddled, they love to be wrapped up and bound tightly and that sort of like warm and cozy material, because it makes them feel safe and secure, it relaxes them like, like, almost like they were back in their mother's womb. And so it was nothing special for them, as they saw this. It is- there's a baby wrapped in closet, well, it was pretty common practice. But why was the swaddling cloths and the wrapping up of this baby Jesus and these cloths meant to be so significant? Why was it a sign for these shepherds?

Well, I read about this from a Jewish rabbi who is very familiar with the Holy Land. His name is Rabbi Jason Strobel, and he makes some fascinating conclusions and observations about the reactions of these shepherds. These were lambs of the shepherds that were sacrificed in the temple, and a sacrifice that was offered to the Lord, all had to be without spot, without blemish. Well, many- many of their lambs were sometimes quite clumsy, and so when they were very weak and fragile, they would bring them into these caves that they were very familiar with. And these caves, well, they had a lot of kind of jagged and sharp edges, you know, maybe they were kind of humid and stuff. And if the lamb would have stumbled and fallen, you know- they could even- could have cut himself somehow, quite significantly, and then he would have been blemished. And all that hard work of watching over and protecting and shepherding these lambs, you know, from the very birth well, would have been of no avail, because they had to be spotless, they had to be pure, I mean, no- no blemishes whatsoever. So it is said, by this rabbi, they said that they would swaddle them in these cloths to protect them when they were just first born. So, you can imagine these priestly shepherds, these Levitical shepherds, they came into the cave the Passover lambs were born, and now they would see this child, Jesus, born in this cave, swaddled exactly like the Passover lambs that they knew. And they said, Well, hey, there's something significant here. This is really- you know, a deep and meaningful sign. This is the Lamb of God, they would have thought, you know.

And then this rabbi, Rabbi Strobel, he goes on to explain, I think this is fascinating, he says, he explains the very origin of those cloths themselves. Why were these cloths themselves special? Well, I think these shepherds would have noticed something that- that you see that he explains how the priests wore special robes when they were officiating in the temple, and when those robes were like too worn out to be used anymore, they didn't just throw them away. And they were sacred vestments so they had a kind of holiness, a sanctity that could not be discarded. So they would reuse them. And what did they do? Well, they would take these robes and they would cut them into strips, and the primary thing they would use these strips for was to make the wicks for the menorah. This menorah is this, you know- this seven branched candelabra that stood in the holy place just outside the Holy of Holies, and it illuminated that area in front of them. And the menorah always had to burn. The light was never to go out. It represented God's presence among his people. So Rabbi Strobel believes that Jesus was wrapped in swaddling cloths that were made actually of priestly garments, and the shepherds would have seen these cloths that they would have known about, and they were said- Whoa, the baby is wrapped in priestly garments. He's in the cave where the lambs are usually born, and he's swaddled like a lamb. But where did Mary and Joseph get these- these priestly garments, these- these strips of cloth from?

Well, he suggested, Mary and Joseph were from the tribe of Judah, you know, from the family of David, and they were not a priestly tribe as such. So where did they get the garments from? Well, he suggested, maybe it was from Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. You remember how the story unfolds before Jesus' birth, how an angel appears to John's father, Zechariah, while he's doing what? While he's officiating there in the temple, in that holy place, precisely where the menorah stood. And he's told about the supernatural birth of John the Baptist, and his wife, Elizabeth, in her old age, is going to have a child. And he then goes on to tell his wife about this vision of the angel. And then six months later, Mary walks in, and the baby in Elizabeth's womb, as we know, kicks within her with joy, and she herself recognizes Mary as being pregnant with the Messiah. She says, "The mother of my Lord." So imagine that because Zechariah was a priest, and that Mary came, and they realized that she was pregnant with the Messiah. They believed all that, yeah, the Messiah was prophet, was a king, and he was a priest. And that- well, Zechariah gave some of his priestly garments, and that's exactly what was used to wrap, yeah- their baby's Son, Jesus, when he was born, which would have been assigned to those difficult Levitical shepherds. And that's what Luke confirms in the Gospel, "When they saw this," he says, "they made known what had been told about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart," and the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen as it had been told them. And seeing him where he was and being swaddled like that in those priestly garments.

Suddenly they would have understood that not only is this the Lamb of God, but also he's the light of the world, because he's wrapped in the priestly garments used to make wicks of the menorah, which gave light in the temple somehow. I mean, they would have understood that he's the Emmanuel, the God with us, which is exactly what the light of the menorah and the wicks and the oil came from when- you know, when they were communicating this to all who saw it. They fell to their knees. They adored, well, that group of men- that group of poor shepherds are- are adoring that child. And it's such a touching scene for all of us that so often these men are pictured adoring the Christ child in so many- so many paintings. You know, it's such a beautiful and joyful response, and you see it in Gothic paintings. You see it in Renaissance nativity scenes, and their faces are often shown to be very, very joyful. Maybe their feet are a bit dirty and their own clothes are kind of worn out, but they're smiling. And sometimes we have all kinds of these shepherds that artists have depicted, sometimes they're carrying bagpipes on their backs. You've seen

some with flutes and a horn and flutes and other musical instruments, just to suggest how happy they were. They were- they were, you know, they were singing Glory to God. Just all these instruments amplify and emphasize the joy of the Savior's birth.

Well, we too want to be like those humble shepherds now and truly see the Lamb of God as these rough men did. You'll see both those strips of- of cloth and the child wrapped in them as- as a sign of his divinity, that he is the Lamb of God. They may have been poor, they may have been hardened by the elements, they may not have been very- very cultured, but they did recognize the divine when perhaps no one else, other than the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph recognized the child Jesus. What prayer will be yours when you sit in front of the Nativity scene this Christmas, you know, like, what tone will your prayer take on my prayer also. Well, St. Josemaria would often pray in front of nativity scenes during Christmas. Normally, you know, normal times he would praying in the tabernacle in a church or in an oratory. But there's something very endearing about these little figures that we can set up or unbox, you know, the ox and the ass and some stray sheep wandering about onlookers there in the sacred cave. You know, one of your children can maybe bring their toy Spider Man, or, I don't know, a Barbie doll to watch as well. But we must look with faith at those shepherds too, with that connection that they saw, that they made with the temple and the priestly garments and the manger. It all- it all really fit together to intensify their sense of abandonment. You know that God is really here, that he has allowed us to witness this divine moment. I pray that you see these nativity scenes in your home as a divine moment.

For St. Josemaria that time of prayer was very special, and sometimes he felt himself kind of like in the guise of a shepherd with dirty feet. You know, 1956 someone took note as he made his prayer in a meditation. In, 1956 he said, "I gaze upon God lying in a place where only beasts dwell, and I cry out, 'Jesus, where is your royalty, my child?' Have you seen the greatness of God who has become a little child? For his father is God, and his servants are angelic beings, and here he is in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes." It's a beautiful prayer that really touched the people listening to this. There's something both poetic and yet very normal about this manger scene, which is both very poor at the same time, yeah, very rich. And we want to experience that prayer and make it a point that, you know, during this time of Advent, you fix up a really nice nativity scene with mountains and, you know, little houses and lambs and anything you want to help you do that prayer. And your children too, and your friends, you could show it to them, but as a kind of an altar of prayer, some true poetry, but also some true prayer that we can, you know, that we can glean out of that.

You know, one of the most poetic authors of the 19th century was Frederick Faber. He was an Anglican priest who then later converted to Catholicism. He was a good friend, also, of Cardinal Newman. He became an Oratorian, and he wrote some of those beautiful hymns and some of those beautiful accounts of just this absolute lyrical beauty. I always like to go back to him, because it's just- just beautifully written. And every Christmas I pick up his book, *Bethlehem*, which I read many times, but I just like going over it and just read it again and pick up the details of his description. And he's really all about this devotion to these shepherds and how this can help us in the manger. Now I'll just read to you one of his descriptions here about Bethlehem. He says this, "Bethlehem exists as a living power in its continual production of- of supernatural things in the souls of men. It is forever alluring them from sin. It is forever guiding them to perfection. It is forever impressing peculiar characteristics on the holiness of different persons. It is a divine type, and it is molding souls upon itself all day long, and its works remain and adorn the eternal home of God. A supernatural act of love from a soul in the feeblest state of grace is a grander thing than the discover of a continent or the influence of a glorious literature, yet Bethlehem is eliciting 10s of 1000s of such acts of love each day from the souls of men." Isn't that wonderful that- that Bethlehem, that our nativity scene,

could do that elicit acts of love each day from us, and we picture these poor shepherds that are close to us, but they do invite us to turn our- our face to God, gaze upon this child, kind of like- like an urgent rush.

Fr. Faber describes, very poetically, the multiple layers of beauty, of grace, of harmony that happens to someone who gazes upon that sacred cave. And I'll just leave you with this last little description. And I think I was like this, he says, speaking about the cave- he says, "its sphere of influence is the whole wide world, the regions where Christmas falls in the heart of summer, as well as in the lands- in these lands of ours." Of course, he was referring there to England, right, these lands of ours. "It is everywhere in dense cities where loathsome wickedness is festering in the haunts of hopeless poverty, keeping itself clean there as the sunbeams of heaven. It vibrates upon deep mountain glens which the foot of priests barely treads and down in damp minds where death is always proximate and sacraments remote. It soothes the aching heart of the poor pontiff on his throne of heroic suffering and generous self-sacrifice," he was referring there to Pope Pius the ninth, who was his Pope at that time. He continues, "and it cradles the rest of the sick child, who, though it cannot read, as yet, has a picture of starry Bethlehem in its- in its heart, which his mother's words have painted there. Bethlehem," he says, "is a daily light in 1,000 dark places, beautifying what is harsh, sanctifying what is lowly, making heavenly the affections which are most of Earth."

Well, I pray that you have this wonderful experience of the impact of the Nativity scene in this time of Advent and in the time of Christmas. We can have recourse to the example of these poor shepherds who looked upon with such faith in that child, they could truly say, this is the Lamb of God. He's wrapped there in these swaddling clothes that for us is truly the sign of that Messiah that we have been expecting. Let Lord- let the Lord Jesus be a sign for us during this time of Christmas.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this time of prayer. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.