

Christmas Eve 2022

It is near the end of the day and a donkey works its way over the rocky hills. Led by an older man and carrying a woman about to give birth. They have travelled far and have entered an unfamiliar land – summoned to Bethlehem on official business. A census count based on the man's lineage. The town is unfamiliar. In time it will become a hostile and unsafe place when the king feels threatened by a newborn. But that is in the future.

Lodging is difficult to come by and the family must settle for a humble stable. One already inhabited by other animals. Time is running out for the woman, so the stable must do. They settle in as best they can, and the woman gives birth to a son. His bed is a manger.

The night is bright, and stars fill the heavens and one special star brighter than the rest shines on the stable. The night is so clear and so still that the sound of angels singing can be heard. Singing with joy and announcing the birth of a child. Emmanuel to live among us.

Angels singing – it had never been heard before and certainly not by the local shepherds. They were close by and tending their flocks. Frightened but also curious they followed the star and reached the stable. Present were a man, a woman, and a newborn child. Without being told, they knew this was no ordinary family and no usual birth. A savior long predicted. Listening to the angels, feeling the wonder before them, they fell on their knees. Even the animals were bowing to the baby. While not completely understanding the events of the night, the urge to kneel and worship could not be denied – it had to be done. When the feeling of grace and awe is so overwhelming – we have no choice but to kneel and bow our heads. We cannot do otherwise.

How long did they stay? That is not recorded. It is noted only that they returned to their flocks – forever changed.

The present day:

No more rocky paths traverse the countryside. Paved roads run through the Judean hills. Buses move along the road. In this era there is no doubt that the

travelers are entering a hostile land. Security checkpoints slow their progress. Mine fields border the road. Drawing closer to Bethlehem a massive wall hides the city from view – it is a security wall designed to separate good and evil – but which is which. The land is so unwelcoming to outsiders that the Israeli tour guide must step aside – he cannot operate in this foreign land. A Palestinian guide is his replacement. The usual way of life does not exist in this place. Who is the enemy and who is the friend?

It is daytime and the sun is bright and warm. No darkness, no stars, no heavenly host, no angelic music. There are no donkeys on rocky paths. And not a sheep or a shepherd are to be found. Only buses. Many travelers have arrived and given how many are there, it is strangely silent. No idle chatter is heard. They have one destination and one goal which supersedes everything else.

The crowd moves forward – enters the sanctuary of the church. How can so many people be so quiet? Any communication is done in whispers. The crowds wait patiently – no pushing or shoving. Some days the wait can be measured in hours but on this day, it takes less time.

What are they here for? The sanctuary is golden – literally. Its walls and lamps are blazing with brightness. But the focus is not on that dazzling spectacle. All eyes are looking toward a modest doorway. The entrance to the crypt. Slowly and silently the crowd moves forward, descends the stairs, and bows before a star imbedded in the floor and a sacred opening lit by votive candles. There is only silence. Some seekers kneel – some merely bow – but all pray. Forever changed by that holy place the pilgrims exit. Up another stairway and out into the daylight. But the mystery of the darkened crypt lives within them.

Whether it is the night of the shepherds or a day in the present, awe supersedes everything. The awe and the wonder have passed down through the ages and still live with us today. The events of that long ago night have sustained and nurtured us and are as real today as they were then. Listen and hear the angels. The wonder lives on.