

I. Christmas

A. What were those shepherds talking about before the angels appeared to them singing: “Gloria in excelsis Deo”?

- 1. Were they talking about their children...their families?**
- 2. Were they talking about the price of sheep at the market?**
- 3. Were they speaking of the cold night air?**
- 4. Were they speaking of the recent defeat of the Bears over the Green Bay Packers?**

B. Certainly as we come here this night, we too have many thoughts on our minds:

- 1. Some are anticipating the visit of Santa...**
- 2. Some are wondering how Santa is going to pay his credit card bill this year...**
- 3. Perhaps some are pensive about someone dear to them...**
- 4. Perhaps some are weighing heavy burdens that only they know...or few know...**

C. Then we come to this story of the shepherds whose worries were of a different time and place but probably not so different in the end...

- 1. We have the worries of the Inn keepers...**
- 2. The worries of all those not mentioned...**
- 3. We have the needs of this young couple, Mary and Joseph, where will she give birth to her Son?**
- 4. Later those needs will give way to concerns for His and their safety as Herod sends his armies against them.**

II. Who is this child that is to be born?

A. These worries may sometimes so crowd our minds and weigh down our hearts that we might not stop to look up, to raise our eyes...

1. We may find it hard to believe that Christ has truly come to save the world.

2. What has changed with His coming?

B. There are four things about Christ's coming that set it apart from all the other comings...apart from all the others who have said that they have been sent from God... They may have all been good men, but Christ's coming is set apart from all the rest and there are, in particular, four aspects of His coming that demonstrate this to us:

III. Four distinguishing characteristics of Christ's coming:

A. First, he is the only one who was preannounced.

1. Before a diplomat is sent from one country to another, letters are prepared and messages sent as to his identity and his mission.

2. When an automaker is about to release a new model, there is all kinds of promotion that goes before it and with good reason. They are getting us ready so that we will buy the car.

3. When an author writes a book, he must give the story a good introduction to get us ready to hear the rest of the story.

4. When a new road is being built, everyone in the area is told about it so that they can make way.

5. There are many who say that they have come from God, but who foretold their coming?

6. This is how we know that Christ is the one, because God prepared us well:

a) Before Christ came, an entire people prepared for his coming.

b) The prophets foretold his birth:

(1) They foretold where he would be born.

(2) They foretold that a virgin would give birth to him.

(3) They foretold his name.

7. Interestingly, as Fulton Sheen points out, it was not just the Jewish people who foretold but almost every major culture has some element in their historical record of His coming:

a) *One ancient Chinese author wrote: "...a light appeared in the Southwest which illumined the King's palace. The monarch, struck by its splendor, interrogated sages. They showed him the books in which this prodigy signified the appearance of the great Saint of the West whose religion was to be introduced into their country."*

8. The ancient Romans wrote about it:

a) *Tacitus wrote speaking for the ancient Romans: "People were generally persuaded in the faith of the ancient prophecies, that the East was to prevail and that from Judea was to come the Master and ruler of the world."*

b) *Suetonius wrote that "It was an old and constant belief throughout the East, that by indubitably certain prophecies, the Jews were to attain the highest power."*

c) *Cicero, after recounting the sayings of the ancient oracles and the Sibyls about a "King whom we must recognize to be saved" asked in expectation, "To what man and to what period of time do these predictions point?"*

d) *Virgil recounted the same ancient tradition and wrote: "a chaste woman, smiling on her infant boy, with whom the iron age would pass away."*

9. Not only were the people of Israel expecting a great King, a Wise man and a Savior:

a) *Plato and Socrates spoke of the "Logos", the "Wiseman yet to come."*

b) *Confucious spoke of the "Saint"; the Sibyls of the "Universal King"*

c) *And the Greek Dramatist spoke of "a Savior and redeemer to unloose man from the "primal eldest curse."*

d) *And we must ask ourselves how the magi knew what that star meant?*

(1) Those who followed the religion of the Zoroastrians and believed that the God of Light would come to save the world.

e) It was not simply that later generations would comment on that which happened, but earlier generations would foretell that He was going to come.

10. So that was the first point that distinguishes Christ, "He was foretold."

B. The second point that distinguishes Christ's coming from all the others is that Christ's coming struck history so hard that he rent it in two.

1. History from the time of His birth would now be measured by that which occurred before He came and that which occurred after He came.

C. The third point that distinguishes Christ's coming from others is that every other person who came into this world, came into it... to live. Christ came into it... to die.

1. Every other person the world over begins their life seeking to live from the first grasp of air.

2. They seek to extend their life...to be successful in life...

3. Christ was different...

a) Certainly we are inspired by those soldiers who give their lives on the field of battle for freedom's sake...

b) We marvel at those policemen or fireman or others who risk their lives to be heroes every day...

c) All of these would choose to live if they possibly could perform their courageous act and continue to live...

d) Christ was different even from them...He came specifically to give His life from the very first moment that He took a breath at the time of His birth.

4. The proof of this is that when we look at that Christmas crèche and the sweet and innocent infant in swaddling clothes, we cannot help ourselves but to hold in our minds at the very same moment the grown man on the cross.

5. So...the third point that distinguishes Christ from the others is that He came to give His life out of love for us.

D. The fourth point that distinguishes Jesus Christ from the others is that He does not fit into the established category of a good man. If Christ is not who he said he was, then he is a liar, a cheat and a fake... and liars are not good men. If he was simply a man and not God, then he lied to us and He cannot be a good man.

E. The reality, however, is that He did not lie to us and so He is the God made man. He is the Savior of the world. He is all that He said He is and then this means that He is able to save us...He is truly our salvation and our hope and our joy and our everything.

IV. So, what were the shepherds doing on that hillside?

A. Could it be possible that they were praying?

1. Could it be that these shepherds were engaging in the most manly task of all...

2. Were they praying as they gazed up at the clear starry night so that it was they who heard the angels singing because they were listening.

B. Then, this night, this is what we are to do... we are to listen, to pray and to sing with the angels: "Gloria in Excelsis Deo."

C. We do not ignore the concerns of this world, but we know that we are not alone in bearing them.

D. Most importantly, we know that each of these worldly concerns is born with a vision of eternity, a vision of Almighty God, who gave Himself completely for our sake.