

Afternoon Lesson. Isaiah 61.

24-11-1974

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. Luke 2. vv.9-11.

Just to mention that the central theme in my spirit this day is the good tidings of great joy concerning the birth of the Saviour, in such striking contrast with all the sombre tidings, the sadness and despair of the world and the seriousness of these latter days. So my mind has been channelled by the blessed Spirit of God I believe to this beautiful Scripture. Obviously my spiritual exercise and concern is that the good tidings of great joy should reach our souls in the Sanctuary now by the sovereign efficacy of the power of the Holy Ghost, and in the sacred fragrancly of the peerless Name of our Saviour Jesus Christ: that our souls may be melted under a sense of

His Personal Advent; that He will come to our hearts.

As we gave a pledge this morning, let us begin our meditation in relation to the significance of those to whom the angel appeared and the glory of the Lord shone round about. For instance, when you read the account by the evangelists by divine inspiration, you find the Lord had various methods of making the birth of Christ known to those who waited for Him, as the Magi from the East, who, under the influence of the Spirit recognised His star. I shall not go out of my depth, only to say it must have been a star appearing specially brilliant and significant for them, and they followed it. After some delay they came to the very place. How wonderful it is to have a heavenly luminary guiding us,- Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the light of the Spirit in the gospel. When they came to the sacred place they saw their Saviour. I shall not try to cover the whole of the range, but how sweet it would be now if Christ so came to this House of God, and precious souls came and worshipped Him and presented unto Him gifts, opening their treasures.

I must pause to put this to you. Have you something that is superior to and eclipses all earthly treasure? treasure in your soul so one day you will open your treasure and present it to Christ? You know well the line of divine truth that is the precept in my spirit, - a gracious, loving testimony to His praise before the Church of God; your heart opened, and all your love and praise and sorrow presented to Christ.

I must apply myself to the case in hand. The angel made a special visitation to herald the birth of Christ to these shepherds. I said this morning, the angel did not go to the imperial palace in Rome, or to the temple in Jerusalem. He came to the shepherds, keeping watch over their flock by night. I do not want to go beyond the boundary of inspiration of the Spirit. I am persuaded in my own soul that we have here two things that are highly significant in the miserable, wretched, ruined state of the world then and now: the glory of the Lord; the Shekinah glory; the saving glory of the Lord round about them. The angel's appearance and annunciation to the shepherds signifies two things. It brings before us the sweet, loving concept of Jesus, the One born being the great Shepherd of the sheep. This is the concept of divine love; Christ coming to be their Shepherd, so you sing David's pastoral Psalm; "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." and through to the end. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of ~~death~~, the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies," Listen; "Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." has it never? "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." This precious Person, this dear Babe,- the Lord is my Shepherd, and a cardinal doctrine laid down concerning the great Shepherd of the sheep is; "The good

shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." His precious life He laid down ~~for~~ voluntarily for you, poor sinner. Are these good tidings of great joy? a Shepherd who loves them, watches over them, feeds them, protects them, guides them, rescues them, heals them, defends them, and brings ~~them~~ them to everlasting bliss: the Shepherd.

My friends, we are not without a blessed Shepherd. I want to love and praise Him more. Some of you have been proving "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." When you think of the concept of Jesus as the great and good Shepherd and His flock, you see the contrast in the terrible state of the world: no joy; no good news for generations; paralysed with the fear of tyranny; in a state of sadness and despair; and a Shepherd is born to love, guide, feed, teach, bless them.

It is generally believed that the shepherds were temple shepherds, and the sheep were used in a sacrificial way in the temple. I see here the precious One born is, as beloved Peter tells us in his first epistle, chapter 1; "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." This to me is the second significant point, and did not Simeon, dear, godly, gracious, waiting, satisfied, happy Simeon see it in the holy joy of his saved, redeemed soul as he held the sweet Babe in his arms? How do you think he held Him in his arms? How would you hold Him in your arms? In the embrace of adoring faith and reverent love. He saw the agony of the Babe before Him. When he spoke in prophecy to His mother he obviously referred to the cross of this sweet Babe. "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." This was accomplished when Christ was hanging on the rugged wood of Calvary's cross, and there stood His dear mother, - one of them. I judge we have the two-fold significance of the angel appearing to the shepherds in the annunciation of His birth, and also a guide line to the institution of the sacred ordinance of the ministry of the everlasting gospel, to be shepherds with flocks watching over ~~them~~ them, sometimes by night.

I will take a further step, and I hope to feel the sweet influence of the Spirit. I cannot refrain from a few observations on the fact given us; "watching over their flock by night." It is this word 'night' that seems to grip my spirit and understanding. It means a vigil of love; tender and prudent love: watching over their flock by night; the fidelity of love. It is this term 'night' I hope to be led to speak on.

What is suggested to us by 'night'? Many things. It is a time of darkness, when the sun is below the horizon; and I will begin here. There are those

who are watching prayerfully, affectionately, in deep love, over their flocks by night, and the night some are in for whom you have a prayerful regard, is the night of unregeneracy. I have told you before, there have been a few sweet times in this pulpit in my soul when I have embraced those you have in your hearts. There is a prayerful, loving watching over them, to plead with the Lord for them, and to believe that one day He will work in their souls although they are in the dark night of unregeneracy. I wanted to say that. Some of you will appreciate it, and some of you will know well when the Lord came and visited you, and quickened your soul into life and stopped you. You remember the day and hour. I assure you there were those watching over your soul when you were in nature's death and darkness. I felt I must say that. Of course, it is most blessed to get a little crumb of encouragement, that the Lord is beginning a work of grace in their souls,- some blessed sign or token. These then are among those who are watched over, prayerfully and in love.

I will go to the other section. I wish I could give you something positive on the first. The Lord is able to, so your heart is broken and melted at His dear feet in sweet hope and expectation of what He Himself will accomplish. The second exposition of night in relation to the flock is, those souls having been quickened into divine life who are under condemnation of the law. You see, the law has a place in the economy of God in salvation, in a spiritual application to the soul, and the application is to strip, wound, kill. They are apprehended, accused, charged, condemned, and they have no hope; nothing but sin. They see only certain destruction before them, and really know their lost, ruined, undone state before God. This is vital indeed. It is a dark night; one of the darkest that ever a poor soul can come into. You have no hope at all: you are lost feelingly before God. Some of you could give an able, blessed commentary on this as to personal experience. You would know those sorrowful hours when you paced this weary earth and felt before God you were going to the pit. You had no hope, and God is just. What a dark night! The whole point is, how may one be prepared for good tidings of great joy unless one is in a place to need them, and to realise how precious this is? "Sinners can say, and none but they,

'How precious is the Saviour'." (806)

I wonder what your poor heart has to say on this point? Where were you? I think of one man, (and I must speak discreetly) one man suddenly found himself changed from an entertainer among the troops. Because of his temperament, his natural disposition, he was singing songs, and he was suddenly stopped by God. The man took his rifle and intended to pull the trigger, he was in such misery and torment; in a feelingly lost state. The Lord stopped him. How? With good tidings. My friends, there are some here have been on the verge of black despair, and it is only the mercy of God saved

them. You know what you contemplated. The Lord stopped him with good tidings of great joy, and he did not know it was in the Bible. It was this; "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Could you ever have tidings more wonderful to a condemned, lost sinner? From that moment, my friends, the man had a mark on his soul of one who should go and proclaim good tidings of great joy. This is all in the subject. He received good tidings of great joy, and the Lord purposed that for many years he should stand and proclaim it. I will say this to you, and I speak with the greatest propriety: when a poor soul is in despair and Satan may have urged them to terminate their existence, and God interposes, it is a mark of mercy. God has stopped him, as though He says; "This brand I have plucked out of the fire."

I have named to you the second part, of night; a soul under condemnation and in despair. That soul is capacitated for good tidings of great joy. You are in the place to receive ^{them}. God knows I have no mind to name or to refer to self, but I cannot speak for you, can I? I would wish you to give your own testimony, you who are baptised members of Christ, to give it more often to others. You see, blessed be God for good news, good tidings of great joy.-

"The vilest sinner out of hell,
Who lives to feel his need,
Is welcome to a Throne of Grace,
The Saviour's blood to plead." (527)

"Good tidings of great joy." "This is a faithful saying, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." "He came to seek and save the lost." - good tidings of great joy. What did the Lord bring to your poor soul? "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin...If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." "If thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared." O the wonder of it! "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness." Good tidings of great joy, to those who are bankrupt, lost, ruined, undone, sinking! "Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom." And the words of our Saviour on the cross; "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." So, "keeping watch over their flock by night." Has the night passed? Has the Day Spring from on high visited you?

There are two other things on my spirit on 'night'. One we had in our Lesson this morning in Revelation 12. You remember the solemn word that has contributed to the present dark night we are in the experience of. "Woe to

the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time." It is a dark season in the Church of God to day. There are two things, obviously. One is, and we must be honest and face them solemnly,- what creates night? I am speaking to those who know Christ: what creates night? I will tell you quickly. It is when He hides His face from us: it is the hidings of the Lord's face: it is night.

"Tis Thy sweet beams create my noon;
If Thou withdraw, tis night." (186)

He hides His face, and He is silent. You will groan; "Be not silent to me: lest, if thou be silent to me, I become like them that go down into the pit." It is night here, and it is upon us; there is no doubt about it. I think I could describe my feelings in this way. In these days there are times when the sun breaks through the clouds and you get a beam. Soon there is cloud again. I do not feel destitute of the inshining of the Sun of righteousness, and I would thank Him for it, but there is just a beam and it is beclouded again, and there is a cloud over the Church of God. "Is there not a cause?" Is not the Spirit of God grieved? Are we not guilty of grieving Him? The devil has done his deadly work. The people of God will never go to perdition, but with all his subtlety and craft and malice, and transforming himself into an angel of light, he has cast a spell over the Church of God,- not every individual. The world has come into the Church: things that grieve the Spirit have come in, so it is night; it is dark. O man, you cannot deny it! O woman, you cannot deny it! I well recognise there are exceptions, but it is generally night. There is indeed gross darkness in the earth.

We must come close home to the Church of God, because God will begin at us. In our state before the Lord it is night, there is no doubt about it. They kept watch over their flock by night,- and one day the Lord will come again and we shall be delivered from this. You may come back to me and say; "How do you know?" I will tell you. Let us have the correct language. "Behold, I, will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth?" He will come, my friends; He has come to some. "for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness." I will just say to you, you may have a serious affliction, or a heavy trial, and the Lord comes in the trial, and in the affliction or trial or distress He will sit as a Refiner, and you will bless Him to your dying day for the dispensation because He came to recover, cleanse, purge, refine

you, to bring you back to His feet, and when He has done His work and sanctified it to you, how you will know good tidings of great joy! "Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up. After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight." "Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips." Amen.