

TO KNEEL WHERE THE SHEPHERD'S KNELT

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It was the beginning. That simple familiar story we heard again from Luke's gospel is the beginning of this, our Christian faith. Oh, Pentecost was the birthday of the *church*, but this is the beginning of our *faith*. It was an amazing event in that long-ago stable, where people came to kneel in front of Baby Jesus, and where pilgrims have come to kneel down through the tunnel of history.

The shepherds were the first to come. From the hills around Bethlehem, they heard and saw what they later described as angels singing "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to God's people on earth." They came to the manger, half curious, half terrified and they knelt before the child. They did not have many words; these were simple men. They just knelt there where it smelled of animals, which was fine with them, and somehow knew they were on holy ground. They didn't stay long—they had flocks to tend—but when they left, they knew they would never be the same again.

Three Wise Men, the Magi, came next, traveling a great distance, following a star, to pay homage to this wee child, and to bring him gifts—gifts that no baby could play with—gifts that foretold his royalty (the gold), his holiness (frankincense), and his death (the myrrh used for embalming). They left by a different route because already, there was a manhunt on for the baby.

So next came the soldiers, sent by a jealous king, bent on killing all the newborn boy babies in the region and they did get most of them—but they did not find Jesus. Those bearing death in their hearts have never been able to find Jesus. But they found many, too many, of those other Holy Innocents.

It was years before others came to the manger, but then there began a slow trickle that grew and grew and grew: apostles, disciples, women and men, children with loaves and fishes to share. They came to the manger seeking a healer, a messiah who would help them find the strength to overcome their Roman oppressors. They came looking for a king and they found a baby but they knelt and listened with their hearts. Many of them stayed because this child gave them the strength they needed—not from outside in, but from inside out. He healed their sickness, and blessed their poverty, and did not make the Romans go away but made the people less afraid of them.

Before long, others came to the manger, too. Some were poor and sick, some were angry at the world around them. They came because they heard that this baby was from God and that he would bring justice and peace into the world. They came to the manger even when it was not safe, when people were killed for kneeling by the baby. They came anyway and they knelt and they laughed and clapped their hands, and they knew that when they died, they would still not be separated from this baby, who laughed and clapped his hands with them.

Sometime later, other men came to the manger. They were very well dressed, and they brought questions.

"Who are you?" they asked the baby. "We need to know who *you* are so we know who *we* are and what we should *believe* and how we should write our creeds and what we should teach our children."

And these Very Important men in their beautiful garments, with their pious faces knelt there, where the shepherds had knelt, and they presented their questions, and they listened but they didn't always hear. Then they argued with each other about what they heard, and some of them stopped to listen again, and *finally*, when they were quiet enough, they heard these words:

"This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

And they went away, their questions answered, and they wrote their doctrines and creeds.

More and more people came to the manger then. Some of them knelt by the baby and prayed and listened and, like the shepherds so many years before, they went away changed forever in some way they couldn't quite explain. Others came, stuck their heads in the stable door, checked the manger stop off their list of places to see, and went away, unmoved and unchanged.

There came a time when the well-dressed men in their beautiful garments, their arms now full of their doctrines, formed a crowd around the manger so thick that the people without good clothes and official doctrines could not get near the manger and they had to kneel far out on the hillside and trust that the baby was still there, in the manger, where the shepherds had knelt. Once in a while, they caught a glimpse of him, but mostly they stayed because they remembered how different they were when they were near him.

Some came to the manger so sure they already knew everything there was to know about the baby that they did not listen at all. They were Crusaders and Inquisitors, some popes and cardinals and televangelists, and when they left, the baby cried.

Through the years some special people did come to the manger. Julian of Norwich came and she was able to talk to the baby as no one else could, and when she left, she announced to the waiting people that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

Martin Luther came and shoved his way through the wall of well-dressed doctrine-keepers, and when he reached the baby, he said simply: "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me." And God did, and the baby smiled, and Martin handed out Bibles to all the people kneeling on the hillside.

Dorothy Day came, and made her way to the manger, and looked around and mumbled under her breath, "This will never do," and began to open a path for the working people on the hillside to come closer. And Martin Luther King came and told the baby, "I have a dream," and the baby kicked his tiny feet and giggled.

Still the people came. Some came and smelled the animal dung and wrinkled their noses and went away. Others came in and shoveled the dung, brought in fresh hay, patted the animals, knelt by the baby and went away to feed their sheep and tend their flocks, singing songs about the baby as they went.

So many people have come and gone since that first angelic announcement. But these days, the crowd around the manger is thin and there is so much noise outside the stable. There are still those who come to kneel where the shepherds once knelt. They come expecting to be healed and transformed—and they are. They stay, ignoring the pain in their knees, happy among others there kneeling and listening, listening to their hearts.

If the news folk had been there all those years ago, they would have moved their cameras by now away from the manger to the hillside, where so many of the people who came to find the baby now stop to argue with each other about who is right—and they never do get down the hill to the stable. The baby waits patiently.

And here *we* are today, having heard the story again, and having blessed our manger and ready to kneel after Communion to sing about this Silent Night. Tomorrow, some of our living rooms will be full of torn wrapping papers and squealing children and overfed grownups and that's fine. A glorious occasion deserves a magnificent celebration and we have prepared for weeks to celebrate this occasion.

But please, remember the manger, where it began. Remember it not just at Christmas and Easter, but in February and in August and in the middle of the night and when you're so busy you can't think straight. Come back to the manger in your heart and kneel where the shepherds knelt and listen. The news media wasn't there to capture the live event when it happened, and despite thousands of years of evidence, they could never capture the miracle and mystery. Only we can do that.

In the spirit of this season of Chanukah, let me read you these words from a Jewish prayerbook:

Let religion be to us life and joy...

Let it be a voice of renewing challenge to the best we have, and may be,,,

Let religion be to us the wonder and lure of that which is partly known and understood...

Religion, uniting us with all that is admirable in human beings everywhere;

*holding before our eyes a better life for humankind, which each may help to make actual.**

This birth is where our faith begins and where we are transformed, where we are loved so much, where God in tiny flesh giggles in welcome, and where, when we leave, we have so much more love to give. *AMEN.*

Readings: Christmas Eve: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20.

Christmas Morning: Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-20.

*excerpted from "Poems and Prayers", #18, from *Gates of the House*, The New Union Home Prayerbook. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 5737/1977.