

“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem ...”

As did the shepherds, let us say this Christmas morning, “Let us go now to Bethlehem.”

But wait; God talking through angels to shepherds? At that time shepherds were despised. This story seems to contradict commonly held beliefs about shepherds and is saying that there are some good shepherds after all. Unlike this Gospel story, people said shepherds stole things, they were lazy, they broke the rules and that they were dangerous.

There are so many groups with these descriptors today: immigrants, incarcerated people, people on welfare, and then certain ethnic groups. Some say it about the Palestinians and others about the Israelis. Those reputation of shepherds are rejected.

We would rather to Bethlehem without those with the reputation of shepherds. That could easily be done. Moving west from Jerusalem Israeli soldiers would allow us to pass through a so called border crossing which is an opening in a grey concrete wall into the West Bank or occupied territories. We can also easily move back through that opening with our documents.

But on the other side we would find people with the reputation of shepherds. Bethlehem's Palestinians cannot easily move back and forth from this grey wall. It seems to me that they seem to have taken on the baggage that shepherds carried when Jesus was born in the place where Jesus was born.

There is so much distrust and so much control that the words written at this gateway to Bethlehem seem absurd: Peace be with you.

With the realities of life for the Palestinians in Bethlehem that sounds like a duplicitous motto. But aren't duplicitous motto's just a fact of life? Look at advertising; listen to politicians' speeches and all the false promises made to you not only by people you don't know, but even the people you do know.

You have to be open to being surprised I think to also be open to the possibility that not all mottos are duplicitous. I think that's what the shepherds got the moment they stood terrified in the night out in the middle of no where with an angel standing in front of them and with a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace ...”

We know they felt that they had not heard a duplicitous motto because the scripture reads, “The shepherd returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them.”

But grey walls continue to be built around people seen as people who might steal things, who could be lazy, might break the rules and are considered dangerous. Hopefully this will keep all others safe.

But the shepherds, these despised people are chosen bring the Good News of Jesus’ birth to others. The set-up is being changed. The system is being upset. Their old rules are broken. What are the new rules?

But we cannot free ourselves from this set-up until we quit secretly putting parts of ourselves behind grey concrete walls without exit permits. There cannot be peace on earth if there is not peace within ourselves.

Our lack of peace within ourselves comes in part from the dysfunction within ourselves. It comes from avoiding the shepherds of our inner landscape. It is rejecting parts of ourselves we find unacceptable and then trying to forget all about it.

The forgetting is wrapped up in seeing it outside of ourselves. Placing it all onto others – whoever those despised shepherds might be. But secretly within ourselves we then fear that we cannot be loved. But this is a lie. Christmas is about the truth.

This truth is described in today’s epistle, “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy..”

The goodness and loving kindness of God isn’t just to make us feel better about ourselves. It is something much more fundamental. It is radical re-defining of who we are. It allows us to receive love fully.

In the words of the epistle, “through water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

To know that we are loved by God because God cannot help but love results in our rebirth. It is love without any fear of rejection. Even with the shepherds in our inner landscape God still loves us! That is so remarkable. And it gives peace of mind and peace of soul.

But we can build grey walls within ourselves which end up keeping ourselves and God separated.

To do away with these walls we will have to cease and desist from blaming some unacceptable part of our self and then sending it off behind a grey wall to trying and forget it exists. We have to let the shepherds in our inner landscape announce to us that

God is here closer than we ever expected and to let them become to us the messengers of peace.

And they will lead us to the place where we can visit the Christ child born within us.

It takes courage to visit Christ this way and humility. And it will take some searching to find the Christ, “because there was no place for them in the inn.”

Christ was not born in the center of society, but on the fringes; not in Rome but in a poor colony of the empire; not in Jerusalem but in Bethlehem; not to parents of importance but to an unknown girl to her fiancé; not at her mother’s home or even a hotel but in a barn.

It staggers the mind how Christ enters from the margins. We could have easily missed his coming then – we could easily miss his coming now!

The margins of our awareness – how difficult to pay attention to these places of consciousness. Our focus is on the busy places, the places of so called importance, the place of the center. To find Christ will require a shift in focus.

It will probably require going to the other side of the grey walls within us and staying in places we find uncomfortable. But there in the midst of those places is also the place the angel describe as the place of, ‘good news of great joy’.

It is the place of inner reconciliation that leads to outer reconciliation. This inner transformation will help us to achieve outer transformations to find a way to live in peace in the world.

The words of the angels are not duplicitous. The words, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace ...” are not a lie; they are the truth. They speak the truth about the peace that can be realized within ourselves and the peace that can be realized among us.

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace.” Like Mary, treasure all these words and ponder them in your heart.