

Go out in joy

by [Rosalind Brown](#) in the [December 16, 1998](#) issue

Oh, the majesty and magnificence of God's presence! Oh, the power and splendor of his sanctuary! . . . Mary wrapped him in swaddling clothes and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

After Advent's four weeks of preparation for God's coming, of learning again what it means to live lives predicated on hope in God, the time has come. We are expecting the arrival of our Savior. As always, God takes us by surprise. Majesty and magnificence are encompassed in swaddling clothes; God's splendid sanctuary is a manger-of-last-resort.

God who risked all
and as a child
in Bethlehem cried in the dark and cold.
Emmanuel:
God is with us,
from heaven to earth see the story unfold.
The Word made flesh in a manger is laid,
see, in a baby, God's glory.

Do not be afraid, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.

The angels provoke fear. Jesus was just about the only person to be comforted by an angel. Everyone else is confronted by God and usually called to some action when an angel shows up. No wonder the standard opening line in the nativity story is "Fear not." Even if an angel were to glide quietly into our presence, we would be startled. To have the night sky suddenly lit with the glory of the Lord would be little short of terrifying. The domestic scale of the manger is not the only truth about Jesus' birth: could the psalmist ever have envisaged the heavens declaring the glory of God in quite this way?

The angel is back! overt glory shining round
the fear-filled shepherds on the stony soil
of Bethlehem.

Brimming over with the news of joy, great joy,
the back-up choir can't resist
an encore in the darkened sky-
God's concert hall-
and shepherds in the front row seats!

The shepherds glorified and praised God for what they had heard and seen.

I collect pictures of the annunciation and the Christmas story as painted by the old masters. It is fascinating to reflect on the different understandings of the incarnation that the artists have expressed. One of my favorite pictures of the shepherds is a detail from a 15th-century Dutch Book of Hours. Eight solid and solemn shepherds hold hands and are obviously doing a circle dance, although two are going in opposite directions and one seems to be standing still. Another shepherd points to heaven, where the words of the angel appear in large letters. Their expressions do not suggest even a glimmer of excitement-these are sturdy, no-nonsense shepherds-but as joy seeps into their souls, their feet cannot help dancing.

Contrast this with a card by a contemporary five-year-old artist. In the stable scene, a red-cheeked Jesus beams cheerfully from his manger. Mary grins like a Cheshire cat and has her arms raised in triumph as though her team has just scored, and two shepherds in multicolored, almost gaudy clothes stand happily at either side. At everyone's feet are seven of the woolliest sheep you could wish to meet, all falling around laughing for joy; one even seems to be holding its sides as it laughs. A lantern swings from the ceiling of the stable as if it has been rocked by an earthquake, and it fills the stable with bright yellow light.

I wonder if the shepherds, those religious outcasts from the hillside, ever anticipated the depths of the joy they suddenly found released in their hearts. When they heard the news they hurried off to Bethlehem. "They came in haste" is a wonderfully evocative phrase. If they fell over themselves to get there, what was the journey back like? Perhaps the joy really did hit their feet and they surprised themselves by dancing. After four weeks of waiting for the coming of Christ, we too should be prepared to be overtaken by joy at his arrival. If we have domesticated the

announcement of his birth so that we are no longer stirred by the news, something is amiss.

Mary treasured up these things, and pondered them in her heart.

Mary had nine months to prepare for this birth, three of them spent with Elizabeth, whose own story was as surprising and full of God's mercy as her own. She already had enough experiences for a lifetime of meditation. Yet even she was taken by surprise at the arrival of the shepherds and their story of angels-angels who had been notably absent when she and Joseph were looking for somewhere to stay. So she added all this to the store of things to treasure and ponder, things that might one day yield their deeper meanings.

This Christmas, what do we treasure, what will we ponder in our hearts?

Ponder long the glorious mystery
breathe, in awe, that God draws near;
hear again the angels' message,
see the Lamb of God appear.
God's own Word assumes our nature:
Son of God in swaddling bands;
Light of light, and God eternal
held in Mary's gentle hands.

The grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all.

Thanks be to God!