

Today, in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, we encounter the final

pilgrimage guides before Christmas Eve:

the angels, the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna.

In Luke, in the fields outside Bethlehem,

the first ones to celebrate the birth of Jesus were angels and shepherds.

Surrounded by heavenly light, an unnamed angel appeared

to the shepherds and announced the birth of the Messiah.

“ A great assembly of the heavenly forces” then joyfully praised God for the marvelous gift

During Advent and Christmas, we remember that

the angel Gabriel spoke to Zechariah,

Mary and finally Joseph to prepare them for the coming Christ.

The angels who sang to the shepherds proclaimed

the wonderful news that we continue to proclaim today:

Don't be afraid. Look I bring good news to you-wonderful joyous news for all people . Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord.

This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger

Then suddenly, more angels appeared and began praising God,

saying, “ **Glory to God in heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors,** Hark the

Herald Angels Sing!

The shepherds listened to the angels,

and now they guide us closer to the manger.

The shepherds were lowly, poor, and uneducated people who simply did what most people were unwilling to do.

But throughout the Bible, God is pictured as a shepherd

and the people of God as God's sheep.

When God chose David to be the great king over Israel,

the boy had been tending his father's sheep.

Prophets described the coming Messiah as

a shepherd who searches for lost sheep.

And Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd

who would lay down his life for his sheep.

The shepherds were the first human beings

to hear the good news of Jesus' birth.

Before the Magi, King Herod,

and Mary and Joseph's family back in Nazareth,

the shepherds received the angel's message.
The least and the last heard the good news first.
When the angels returned to heaven,
the shepherds spoke their own words to one another.

Let's **go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us**

Then the shepherds became witnesses as they
went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child

SO the shepherds then became evangelists as they
returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen

Our last two witnesses and guides, **Simeon and Anna**,
appear in the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the very
early life of Jesus at the close of Luke's birth story.
You might not be as familiar with them.
Forty days after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph traveled
up to Jerusalem to present their child,
like all firstborn male children, at the temple.
This is when the child is given his name, Jesus, as Gabriel said.

At the temple, they were greeted
by a good and righteous Simeon,
an elderly priest who had been promised that
he would see the Messiah before he died.
When Simeon saw the baby,
he lifted Jesus into his arms and praised God.
He is sometimes called "The God Holder".
And what Simeon says recalls God's promises from the Prophets we have talked about, and also the salvation Jesus would offer both Jews and Gentiles.

Simeon was not the only righteous person
waiting at the temple to see Jesus.
Anna is an 84-year-old widow.
She never left the temple area but worshipped God
with fasting and prayer night and day.
Anna stayed alert for the coming of the Christ child.
The sudden appearance of the angels startled the shepherds,

but then they listened attentively.
God may come to us unexpectedly.
Simeon and Anna faithfully prayed and waited for many years
before they experienced God's presence through the baby Jesus.

But they were both attentive to God's Spirit
and were ready to welcome him when.
These saintly guides remind us to be attentive
to God's presence every day.
God may come to us when we least expect it.

Another fitting response to the birth of the Holy Child

is to witness to God's love and to invite others to join in the divine drama.
When we witness, we are following the example of the shepherds.
Once the shepherds heard the angels sing,
they hurried to see the baby Jesus.
Full of joy from their visit with the Holy Family,
the shepherds eagerly shared the good news with others.

How often do we share the good news of Jesus Christ with others?

Witnessing may be defined as one pilgrim
inviting another traveler to join a spiritual journey.
The angels, shepherds, Simeon, and Anna all modeled this behavior.
More than any other time of the year,
seekers are led by the Spirit of God
into our holy spaces hungry for God's grace.
There is no better time to invite a family member,
friend, neighbor, or coworker to come to Christmas Eve worship.

The angels, shepherds, Simeon, Anna, have guided us

in our journey toward God and have showed us
how to respond to the birth of the Holy Child.
As we sing, witness, stay alert, and share with others,
our journeys join theirs as we experience
the gift of God's love at Christmas.

Howard Thurman, an African American theologian
and civil rights leader, wrote a beautiful Christmas prayer
that brings all our guides together as we close.

O God our Father, you have brought us again to the glad season
when we celebrate the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
Open our ears that we may hear again the angels' chorus.
Open our lips that, like the shepherds, we too may witness his birth.
Open our hearts like Simeon and Anna that we may
joyfully welcome to reign over us.
Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill toward all;
through Jesus Christ our Messiah. Amen.

Now let us sing and hear the hope of the story of Christmas once again...