

What Did the Animals Know?

Isaiah 9:2-3, 6-7; Luke 2:8-12

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Have you ever paused to think about what life must have been like around the stable on that first Christmas? Most paintings of the Nativity show Jesus was surrounded by animals at the time of his birth – usually an ox, donkey and sheep were thought to be present. Isaiah also offers an interesting perspective on the matter:

“The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” Isaiah 1:3

Perhaps the ox and donkey were on to something. Did they know something special was taking place in the manger that night? I like to think about what life must have been like around the stable on that first Christmas. I have visited a few live nativities over the years, and found it very moving. It felt like the animals were standing on holy ground.

I think it was no accident that the animals were there to greet the baby Jesus. The manger was like this in that day: The manger where Jesus was born was actually a feeding trough for the animals located inside the house. The Middle Eastern scholar Kenneth Bailey has created some fascinating videos on this subject. They are available on Youtube if you are interested.

So if the manger was in the house, of course the animals were there as well. Have you had an ox or donkey in your guest room lately? No? I didn't think so. But Jesus and Mary did. The stable was home for the animals, and the Son of God borrowed it on that night.

In some parts of Europe, there is a legend that the animals were able to speak at midnight on Christmas Eve as they recognized the birth of the Savior, and knelt down in honor of the Christ child. The poet Barrie Shepherd captured this well in one of poems. He writes:

*Of all the witnesses
Around that holy manger,
Perhaps it was the animals who
Saw best what lay ahead.*

*They were the ones who had paced the aching roads,
Slept in the wet and hungry fields,*

*Known the sharp sting of sticks
And thorns and curses . . .*

*Endured the constant bruise
Of burdens not their own.
In the shadows of that stable,
Might it be that Christ's warmest welcome
Lay within their quiet comprehending gaze?*

Barrie Shepherd, Faces at the Manger

Even the animals adored the baby Jesus. Another source depicting the animals at the manger may be the 7th century text called the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, which is a part of the New Testament apocrypha. It states:

“And on the third day after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, Mary went out of the cave, and, entering a stable, placed the child in a manger, and an ox and an ass adored him. Then was fulfilled that which was said by the prophet Isaiah, ‘The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master’s crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.’” (Isaiah 1:3).

Furthermore, the donkey is the animal most commonly seen in the Nativity. Many scholars believe Mary rode to Bethlehem on a donkey, and, as a result, many artistic representations show Joseph leading Mary into town as she rides on the back of a donkey. Donkeys were a common mode of transportation for the poor in biblical times, further pointing out Jesus’ humble origins.

In addition, who can forget the words of the lovely late 19th century Christmas carol, Away in a Manger, where cattle become firmly entrenched in modern nativity scenes with its’ phrase “the cattle were lowing.”

Sheep are also included in most manger scenes, typically standing or lying near the shepherds. Historically accurate or not, creche animals are here to stay. I rather believe it’s true. Judge for yourself. The manger scene continues to proclaim that all people and creatures are welcome at the stable in Bethlehem. *All* people – and animals. Wouldn’t that be just like the holy child? No manger scene would be complete without the loving gaze of the animals.

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Also present at the stable of course, were the shepherds. Shepherds had a reputation for being rough characters; it was certainly not a glamorous job. They were probably the ones who brought the sheep to the manger. They were out in the fields all night,

in all kinds of weather. They were lowly . . . humble . . . uneducated and poor. In fact, being a shepherd was pretty much as low as you could get. And if one of the shepherds came and sat down next to you in church, you could smile them a mile away! Yet, it was ordinary, down to earth folk like these who were the first to receive news of the savior's birth.

Why were the shepherds the favored ones? There were many others around Bethlehem on that first Christmas who just said, "No" to Mary and Joseph. They were tending to their own business, and they were busy for good reason. The emperor Caesar Augustus had just called for a census for everyone in the Roman world to be enrolled for the purpose of taxation. And so just like Joseph and Mary, thousands of people were headed to Bethlehem to register for the census.

But as for the shepherds . . . here was the irony. These lowly, faithful shepherds were not even expected to go to Bethlehem because they hardly made any money and were not required to pay taxes. Minimum wage. No benefits. Think of that. Those who were least likely were most favored by God.

The shepherds had been looking after their flocks of sheep, when suddenly and unexpectedly an angel appeared. How did they react? They were terrified! And who could blame them? "Don't be afraid" said the angel. "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

A whole army of angels put on what must have been a dazzling light show for the shepherds as they praised God, saying: "Glory to God in highest heaven!" Eventually the angels disappeared from sight and the shepherds hurried to Bethlehem, no doubt waking up half of the town as they looked for the baby. Soon they found Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, just as the angels described. God chose these humble shepherds to join the animals that first Christmas around the stable as the first ones to welcome the Christ child. They were open to the message of the angels, and they were blessed.

Finally, there is a place around the manger for you. Would we be there at all, or like the citizens of Bethlehem, would we be too busy with our everyday affairs? Here is what happened near the nativity scene in our living room a number of years ago:

Our family returned home on Christmas Eve after leading services. We went to bed late, and were sound asleep when at about 3 AM we were awakened by sounds of bells and music. We heard the chorus of “Joy to the World.” No kidding. I thought maybe the eggnog had been spiked!

We all hurried down the stairs to see where the sound was coming from, but found nothing. We went back to bed. About ten minutes later, we heard it again! “Joy to the world, the Lord has come!” Even the dog started barking with all the commotion.

After the third time we finally found the source -- it was a hidden cell phone laying near the nativity. The alarm went off with the chorus of Joy to the World in the middle of the night. Jackson didn't set the alarm, and he thought he turned his phone off the night before. We couldn't explain it. Maybe it was a local angel proclaiming Jesus' birth!

Could it be the angels are using cell phones these days?! Preposterous? I don't know. I can't explain it. Sometimes things need not be explained. Have you followed your angel's beckoning call lately? It is a good reminder to be open to the Word of God – however and wherever it comes. Nothing could be more startling and unexpected than the appearance of the angels announcing Jesus' birth to the lowly, frightened shepherds on that first Christmas.

Will you have the wisdom of the shepherds to follow the angel's command? Here's a hint: The angels' words will likely happen in the common, ordinary circumstances of your daily life. It's interesting to note that the Greek word for angel is “messenger.” That means your angel messenger could be divine *or* human.

So what did the animals know? What were the shepherds thinking about all of this? Of course, we can't know for sure. There are a lot of things about Christmas that remain a mystery. But like Mary, you can ponder these things in your heart. As you sit quietly around the nativity scene in your living room or dining room, something of the Christmas mystery might speak to you. The least we can do is be prepared. Amen

Isaiah 9:2-7

2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

3 You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. 4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

5 Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Luke 2:8-12

The Shepherds and the Angels

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."