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## A holiday changing of hearts

By Father Albert Shamon

Sunday's readings: (R3) Luke 2:1-14; (R1) Isaiah 9:1-3, 5-6; (R2) Titus 2:11-14.

On the first Christmas night, while shepherds kept night watch by turns over their flocks, the angel of the Lord appeared to them saying: "I come to proclaim good news to you — tidings of great joy ... This day in David's city a savior has been born to you, the Messiah, the Lord. Let this be a sign to you: In a manger, you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes."

It is significant that the angel did not tell the shepherds to go to Bethlehem. He simply offered them an invitation: "You will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes" — you will if you go to David's city in Bethlehem.

God's word is always an invitation to us, for God has given us free will and He will never violate it. The angel's words to the shepherds, therefore, were not a command, but an invitation, just as are the messages of Our Lady appearing at Medjugorje. The angel invited the shepherds to go find God, not a God they could see then and there, as Peter, James and John were to see Jesus on Mt. Thabor, but a hidden God, hidden as a babe in swaddling clothes.

So are God's words to us here and now. As Augustine said: "When we pray, we speak to God; but when we read, God speaks to us." He speaks to us through his "angels," the priests. And they proclaim His words to us in the Liturgy of the Word and in the homily. We have heard these words day in and day out, Sunday after Sunday, but the important question is: How have we responded to His word? How have we acted or reacted to His invitation?

How did the shepherds respond? They left the Judean hills; they interrupted their work for one brief moment. And what happened? They found "an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes." And because the infant was God, He touched their hearts and their minds and, from that moment on, they saw things differently and felt things differently. They returned to their work different persons, praising and glorifying God, and filled with the peace God gives to those on whom his favor rests.

Nothing outside them had changed. The sheep still bleated, the hills were still cold, the city folk still spurned them, yet everything was changed — for they had changed. They had dis-

## A Word for Sunday

covered that God loved them! They mattered in His eyes, even though they were nothing in the eyes of the world. Knowing this, their life was different from then on.

So it will be with us. God speaks to us through His angel: the Church and her priests. He speaks in the readings of the Mass and in the homilies. But His words are only an invitation, as they were to the shepherds. Like them, we must take time out, we must break from our work for one brief moment each day and each week. Only then shall we discover His incredible love for us. And once we have, our lives will never be the same again for us.

I suppose that is why Dicken's "A Christmas Carol" is a favorite Christmas story. It captures the very heart of the Christmas message, which is to change the hearts of everyone. Marley's ghost transforms Scrooge into a human being.

And that is the hope of every Christmas: We can change!

As the touch of the Son of God changed a stable into a place of adoration; a crucifix into an instrument of veneration; a land into a holy land; and shepherds into saints, so the infant in the manger offers hope that we too can change.

Nor is this a far-fetched hope. For every Mass is Christmas — Christ is wrapped in the swaddling clothes of bread and wine; every reading and homily is the angel's proclamation; every altar, Bethlehem — a house of bread; and every Holy Communion, a manger — the feeding-box of animals.

This is my hope and prayer for all of you — that you respond to God's word at every Mass and open up the inn of your heart to the infant, so that during the coming year you, too, like the shepherds, will experience a change — a heart filled with more love and joy and the peace that God alone can give.

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## His kingdom will never end

By Cindy Bassett

"Look at all of those people down below," Seth remarked to his brother. "I never would have guessed that so many people had their roots in a place like Bethlehem."

"There you go again," his brother chuckled, "always criticizing this humble little town. You have managed to make a life for yourself here despite all of your complaining!"

"In case you haven't noticed, the lot of a shepherd is hardly a wealthy one," Seth replied.

"Have you forgotten that David tended his father's sheep here in these fields? David didn't despise his small beginning. He became one of the greatest kings of Israel. God promised that his blessings would rest on David's descendants forever and that his kingdom would never end."

"A kingdom that will never end? It is you who have forgotten who rules the world," Seth said dryly. "One has only to look below at the Roman census takers."

By order of the decree issued by Emperor Caesar Augustus, all citizens of the Roman Empire were to be counted. This census required everyone to register by returning to their place of birth.

Not even the emperor could have envisioned the crowds that were creating a human traffic snarl in the center of Bethlehem. The patience of the census takers and of the Roman soldiers who oversaw their activities was long since spent. They, too, began silently to question the prudence of the emperor's plan.

If anything could be said in favor of Roman bureaucracy, it was the speed by which these census takers handled the never-ending lines of people.

"Father's name?" An official asked the man who had just identified himself as Joseph.

"Jacob," he replied. "I am a descendent of the house of David."

"What's wrong with her?" the official asked as he regarded Joseph's wife, who was riding a donkey.

"She is very tired," Joseph said. "We have come a long way, and it is nearly time for her to

## The Bible Corner

give birth."

"Try the Bethlehem Inn," the official said, his tone softening a bit. "But I doubt if you'll find a place of lodging anywhere in the village."

"Don't worry," Joseph said to Mary as he led her away. "The Lord will not leave us without someplace tonight."

The Bethlehem Inn had no rooms left. But just as Joseph turned away, the owner suddenly remembered the stable out back. "Wait a moment," he called to Joseph. "I do have a place that is clean and warm, if you don't mind sharing it with a few of our animals."

Business was brisk at the Bethlehem Inn that evening. The owner had completely forgotten to tell his wife about the young couple until Joseph knocked at the door again a few hours later.

"Yes, Ruth is a midwife," Jacob told Joseph. "I'll send my wife immediately to help."

A child was born a short time later in the stable behind the Bethlehem Inn. But the angels did not report his birth to Roman census officials. They went instead to the shepherds who remained in the fields all that night protecting their sheep.

These shepherds found Mary and Joseph with the baby just as the angels had told them. And for years after, they told the story to everyone in the region:

"It was in Bethlehem, the humble birthplace of David, that Jesus Christ, the Savior of the entire world, was born one night."

Scripture Reference: Luke, Chapter 2:1-20.

Meditation: Dear Jesus, it is not to the proud or wise that you come, but to those who place their trust completely in you.

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