

**What the Shepherds Saw**  
Dr. Paul E. McCracken  
Jerusalem Institute for Biblical Exploration

When you imagine the story of the angelic message to the shepherds, what do you picture? When I've posed this question to Sunday School classes and other church groups, the answers are much the same: "The shepherds were blinded by a bright light and angels who were in the air told them that the Messiah was born." That's not exactly how Luke described the incident and when we study the event closely, we discover a new and deeper meaning.

Luke 2:8-9 reads, "In that region were shepherds living in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of THE LORD stood before them and the glory of THE LORD shone around them and they were terrified." First of all, the angel stood before them. This is not an angel up in the sky; this is a messenger right in front of them. There is an immediate presence in their midst.

The other part of the verse is more significant. The glory of THE LORD shone around them. The "glory of THE LORD" or *shekinah*, is not just a bright light in the sky but refers to the physical presence of God. When Solomon's Temple was dedicated, the glory of THE LORD entered into the Temple itself. "And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of THE LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of THE LORD filled the house of THE LORD." (1 Kings 8:10-11) This same cloud had led the people through forty years of wandering from Egypt into the Promised Land. Now, God has a house and his presence, or his glory, resides in it.

Unfortunately, this idyllic situation was not to last. The people slowly fell away from God; turning to idol worship as well as to other immoral deeds and practices. The prophets warned the people to repent, or to turn around, but to no avail. A heartbroken Ezekiel describes a consequence of these sins in a vision:

"Then the glory of THE LORD went out from the threshold of the house and stopped above the cherubim. The cherubim lifted up their wings and rose up from the earth in my sight as they went out with the wheels beside them. They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the house of THE LORD; and the glory of the God of Israel was above them...And the glory of the God of Israel ascended from the middle of the city, and stopped on the mountain east of the city." (Ezekiel 10:18-19, 11:23)

What a heartrending tragedy! Because of the people's sin, the holiness of God was leaving them. God's physical presence had left the Temple. Yet, there was cause for hope. Isaiah 54:7-8 says that "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says THE LORD, your Redeemer." God gives his promise that he will return to Israel to restore his people.

The concept of God abandoning his people, that he would someday come back, sounds strange to the twenty first century Christian. We are accustomed to the idea of God's abiding presence. Yet the prophetic word was clear. The people's sin had caused God to turn away from them for a time. To the first century Jew, there was no doubt that they were living in that period of abjuration. God still hid his face from them – and so they waited.

The next time that the glory of THE LORD is mentioned in the Bible is the second chapter of Luke. "An angel of THE LORD stood before them and the glory of THE LORD shone around them." This is no mere bright light in the sky. Luke is telling us that God has returned! The One that had turned his face away from his people in anger is now smiling on them with love and joy. As always, God has acted in the unexpected. There is no triumphant procession to Jerusalem, as envisioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls. No, above a lonely hilltop outside of Bethlehem, to a band of lowly shepherds, God revealed his return.

This is the good news that Luke is telling us: the same presence that guided the Israelites through the wilderness and that filled the Temple with its magnificence is shining over a Judean hillside. There is good news and reason for great joy. A newborn baby is sleeping in a nearby cave. God has come back.