

A Christmas Reflection



Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice! This is the Nativity of the Lord. Our Advent journey has allowed us to reflect on the need for gentleness in this world, the call to prepare for the coming of the Lord, to respond to God's invitation to come into our lives, and to move from darkness of fear into the light of salvation.

Here we have arrived at Christmas, prepared us for a new beginning. God has come to us fully human in Jesus, and we welcome Him into our hearts to mend this broken world.

One of the most powerful visual statements about the Incarnation was painted in Bruges, Belgium, by the painter Hugo van der Goes around the year 1475. The huge altarpiece representing the Adoration of the Shepherds now resides in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy.

In the tradition of the time, the side panels of the triptych feature portraits of the artist's wealthy patrons, the Portinari family. The side panels frame an astonishing image. The beautiful and symbolic central panel depicts the moment when the shepherds arrive at the stable where the infant Jesus has been born.

All the figures in the painting are at some distance and focused on the vulnerable, naked infant who lies outstretched on the stable's earthen floor. Angels of unearthly beauty encircle the Holy Family, some in the foreground and many receding into the distance. Joseph and Mary, on their knees with hands folded in prayer, adore but do not touch the infant. Domestic animals, including a donkey and a bull, peek out of the stable to see the child.

And there at the edge of the circle are the shepherds, three rough men painted in painstaking and highly detailed realism. There is nothing ethereal about them. They are three real human beings whose lowly occupation is clearly defined. They are mere shepherds. Clearly they have come directly from sleeping on the ground while tending their flocks. We ask--what are they doing here in the face of all this transcendence?

While humbly staying a respectful distance, the shepherds crane their necks to get a better view of the baby. Their heads are bare and they hold their shepherds' staffs.

One is an older man, unshaven and with short grizzled hair. His staff rests in the crook of his arm. His hands are folded in prayer, a real working man's hands, with grimy knuckles and dirty nails. After all, he has just been beckoned from the field. There is a gentle, satisfied smile on his face.

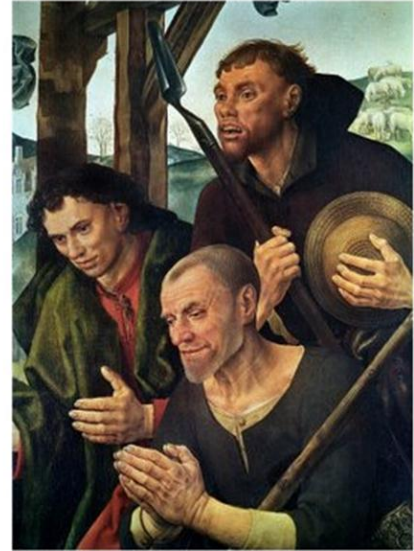
A second man, with the beginnings of a smile and strong, intelligent eyes holds his hands hesitantly outstretched as if he would like to take the child in his arms.

The third shepherd is younger and rougher than the other two, and he stands behind them. He holds his hat in his hand and leans forward to see what the others see. His mouth gapes open at the wonder of this experience. We see his uneven teeth. We see his eyes trying to comprehend what lies before him.

The painter has shown the path of their gaze directly to the Christ Child. In their rapt attention and their yearning body language, they are giving themselves, in this moment, to the child.

God is incarnate in this human child, the baby Jesus. All of heaven and earth sing his praises. God is one with the shepherds and all humanity, no matter how lowly. In the painting, Jesus is totally vulnerable, lying on the cold earth. He has come to be one with us, to share our pain, to help us understand God's love for all creation. Here to save us. This child whose presence is still a mystery to the shepherds, will identify Himself as the Good Shepherd. He is one with them. He is one with us. He is one with all humanity—in all our grimy manifestations, halting and humble, yearning for transcendence.

We welcome this same child into our hearts every Christmas. Let us be aware that we share him with all Creation.



The Catholic Health Association would like to thank Jon Sarta for allowing us to use his music from the albums Catholic Piano Music Vol 8 - Advent and Catholic Piano Music Vol 4 - Christmas for the podcast. His Music can be obtained from mjmusic.com.