A mile and a half, or it may be two miles, southeast of Bethlehem there is a plain separated from the town by an intervening swell of the mountain. This plain is not of much use for agriculture; the ground is too stony and poor. But it does produce good grazing land for sheep, and for centuries shepherds have tended flocks of sheep in this place. In fact it was in just such a place that the shepherds who were watching their flocks by night almost twenty centuries ago learned first of the birth of the infant Jesus the Prince of Peace. It is interesting to think back on that occasion and speculate upon the thoughts and feelings of these shepherds on that great event in the world’s history. That is why this morning we are going to think back in our imaginations nearly nineteen centuries and imagine ourselves visiting a tiny shepherd’s cottage in these hills; we are going to visit the owner of this tiny one roomed house, an aged shepherd, and listen to him as he tells the Christmas story to his young grandson, for this old man was tending sheep as a little boy on that night when Christ was born.

We can picture the tiny cottage in our minds with skins strewn on the floor showing that a shepherd lives there. In the corner the old grandmother and her daughter are weaving; the grandfather sits musing in his chair staring into the fire, and the little boy, tugs impatiently at his sleeve, saying, “Tell me the story, grandfather; you promised you would tell the story of Jesus to me tonight.” The old man reaches out a gnarled hand and gently pats the boy’s head as he continues staring silently into the fire. But the boy is now quiet for he knows that his grandfather will tell him the story as he promised as soon as he finds the words and the inspiration. The little boy is old enough to know that shepherds are trained in patience and are not to be hurried. And so he sits beside his grandfather staring into the fire and trying to see what he is imagining in the glowing coals, and waiting for the story to begin.

At last, the old man’s voice begins, softly and quietly as if he were thinking thoughts that were far away from that tiny room, ideas that could hardly be caught with mere words; and as the low voice speaks on, the little boy follows with his imagination, and by staring hard into the fire he can almost see the story happen as it is told, for shepherds soon learn to use their imaginations for they have little else to entertain themselves with in the long watches. “It was on just such a night as this,” the old man began. “It was cold and clear, one of those nights in the fields when it seemed as if you could almost touch the stars if you stood on your tiptoes. The stars were like glistening diamonds on a black velvet cloth, and I remember that the shepherds kept watching them, for they had never seemed so bright before. We were watching the sheep over by that bluff on the south side of the plain, just about the same place where your father is tending the flocks tonight. We had the sheep there so that they would find some protection from the bitter cold.

“I was just about your age, as I remember; I had just turned eight. It was pretty cold for a lad that young to be out, but I had teased my father to let me come and he finally said yes. I would have been awfully cold in spite of the skins if it were not for the baby lamb I had. That was the real reason I wanted to be out anyway. My pet lamb that my father had given me would be out in the
cold, and I wanted to take care of her. While I was lying there that night under the stars, I held
the little lamb close to me under the skins, and her white fleece kept me warm; I must have kept
her warm too, for she didn’t want to run away from me.

“I don’t know when it was that I first knew something strange and wonderful was happening. I
must have been asleep, as were all the men except the watchman, when something awoke me.
Perhaps it was the lamb’s muzzle against my face. At any rate the first thing I remember was
wondering why she was trembling in my arms. And then I noticed a white light breaking around
about us, soft and white, like the moon’s, not at all like the red glow of the campfire. I sat up
quickly and saw that the light was growing brighter than the brightest moon. I noticed Stephanus
who was standing that watch looking up into the heavens, a look of amazement and astonishment
on his face. And then I heard the dogs barking and howling, and the flocks began to stir uneasily.
Finally Stephanus found his tongue and shouted: ‘Awake! Awake!’ and the men clambered to
their feet reaching for their weapons. And all the while the light was growing whiter and
brighter.”

“Weren’t you afraid, grandfather?” whispered the little boy excitedly as he stared into the fire
with shining eyes. ‘I was, my boy; more afraid than I had ever been in my whole life before. I
thought my heart would stop beating. And all I could do was hold on to the little lamb, and I
clutched her so hard that she began to bleat. But the others were afraid too, even the grown men.
I heard Stephanus cry out in terror, ‘The sky is on fire!’ but there was a chill in the air, a chill of
fear, for this was not like the light from a fire; it was too white, too pure a light. At last it grew so
bright that it dazzled our eyes and I fell to the ground holding my hands over my eyes to shield
them. And then we heard a voice, a voice I had never heard before, a deep voice like the sound
of thunder in the distance call out: ‘Fear not.’ Some of the-men said later that they saw an angel
standing on a level place in the plain, standing there tall and majestic and beautiful beyond the
power of words to describe. But the light was so bright that I saw nothing I only heard the words;
and glorious words they were. ‘Be not afraid,’ the voice said, ‘for behold I bring you good
tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of
David, a Savior, which is Messiah, the King. And this is the sign unto you. Ye shall find a babe
wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.’

“And then before anyone could make a reply, but everyone was too amazed to say aught anyway,
the light grew even brighter, and the voice sang out in a louder tone the first strain of the great
song, ‘Glory to God in the highest’ And then we heard the phrase repeated again and again as if
there were a heavenly choir of angels singing over our heads. And I heard them sing ‘Peace on
earth, good will toward men’ in tones of joy and triumph. I knew then what the prophet must
have meant when he said that all the mountains and the hills would break forth into singing, and
the Psalmist when he said the trees would clap their hands, for it was as if the whole heavens and
earth were singing for joy. And the song re-echoed in our ears, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and
on earth peace, good-will toward men’, just as in a thunder storm in these hills, the thunder is re-
echoed from hill to hill.”

“But you didn’t see the choir of angels, grandfather?” asked the little boy. “I’m sure I would
have looked.” “It was too dazzling to the eyes, my lad, then anyway. But soon the echoes died
away and the light turned a rosy color, like a sunrise in reverse; I looked then, but there was nothing to see, only the shadows lengthening in the field over the startled sheep, as the color burned out in the sky leaving the darkness, and the stars.

“My father was the first to speak. ‘Come,’ he said solemnly, ‘we must go to Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord hath made known to us.’ And so the men quickly gathered the sheep into the fold and we set out, not knowing where to look except that the angel told us to look for a babe in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. ‘Bring thy lamb,’ said my father, ‘that we may offer it to Him if we really find the Messiah.’ I was puzzled about what all this meant. I had heard my father speaking with the other men nights in the fields about the troubles of our people living under the Roman bondage. And they often spoke of a Messiah, a leader who would come to deliver us. But I could not understand how such as he could be a little babe. But I went along with the others puzzling it out in my mind, and as we went the men were praying. I wanted to pray too, for my heart was filled with a wonder and awe and love that I had never felt before. But I was young and being in the fields so much I had not learned many prayers in the synagogue; and the ones I knew did not say what I felt. And so I began to recite the alphabet until the men wondered at what I was doing. I knew that God could put the letters together, and spell out the things my heart was trying to say, even if I couldn’t.

“I don’t know what made us look at the inn the first thing when we came to Bethlehem; the angel must still have been with us directing our steps. But I remember the lantern swinging at the gate, the shouts and laughter from the crowds making merry inside, the many beasts of burden in the courtyard showing how crowded the inn was that night. You see, that was the day of the tax and census, and the town was full of people. That is why the carpenter and his wife had to stay in the stable.”

“And the stable, grandfather, you found him there? What did He look like?” “I can never forget what He looked like, my son, even though I live another three score year. When we came to the stable there was the child lying in the manger, and never will mortal eyes behold a more beautiful sight than He. There were oxen and asses standing and lying about quietly, but even they seemed to be watching Him. Leaning on a staff over the manger was a grave, young man the carpenter, watching the child with an air of wonder. And the beautiful young mother was lying close beside the manger watching with glowing eyes the wonderful Child as His hands reached out to touch his mother’s lips. All the men kneeled down and worshipped Him; but I wanted to come nearer to Him. I was no longer afraid, for I had seen into His eyes, and found a tender love and welcome mirrored there. I wanted to show Him my lamb and give her to Him, too. When my father had first suggested my bringing my pet lamb, I must confess my heart was heavy within me, for I did not want to lose her; she was the most precious thing I had. But when I saw the Child, I thought of nothing else but that she should be put at His feet. I knew He would love and care for her. I remember walking toward the manger, holding the lamb. He saw her and stretched out His hands to me. I looked at the mother to see if it was all right and when she smiled at me so sweetly, I quickly ran up and laid the fleecy lamb at his feet in the manger. I still remember His face, as He reached with his rosy hands toward her white fleece. He always loved little lambs so.”
The voice trailed off in the silence, as the old man sat looking in the fire, wiping his eyes with his rough hand. The little boy sat quietly thinking of his words, his lamb, waiting. The fire snapped and a spark jumped out on the hearth. He pushed it back with his foot, and said softly, “That was a beautiful gift, grandfather.” And then the voice went on, stronger now. “It wasn’t the finest gift he received, I suppose, but I like to think of it as the one he liked best. I remember while we were still there three strangers arrived at the inn. My father could tell from their dress that they had come from some far-off eastern country. I only knew that they were not of our people or like the Romans either. I could tell that they were important people though, because they wore costly cloth and jewels, and the inn people treated them with great respect. They were not interested in the inn, however, but came straight to the manger and bowed down and worshipped with the rest. They brought fine gifts with them, frankincense, and myrrh, and rich gold, and laid them at his feet. But He still held on to the lamb. I remember marveling at this and wondering how those three had found this place. I learned later that they had followed a sign, a great star that appeared to them and directed them to where He was lying.”

“Did you ever see Him again, grandfather?” “That I did, lad, years later, when He had grown to manhood and was traveling around teaching the people a wonderful new doctrine about a God we could call Father, a God who loved his people and cared for them even as a shepherd cares for his flocks. I heard Him preach once on a high hill where he spoke to great multitudes of people who had followed him there. I wanted to get close to Him and touch Him, but the throngs were too great, but I heard His voice, and never will man hear such teachings. His voice was gentle and low, but somehow it carried over all the people so that all could hear. I still remember what he said: ‘Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Ye are the light of the world; let your light shine before men so that they may see your good works; love your enemies and pray for them that despitefully use you; lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven; ye cannot serve God and mammon; seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.’ Hard sayings some of these, but he always spoke in parables so that we all could understand him, and knew that he was right. And he went about healing people too; my cousin’s wife was healed when she touched his coat. He was indeed King but we did not know then of what sort He was. Healings character opposition]

“We found that out later. If I had known that day in Jerusalem what I know now, my heart would have been spared much suffering and sorrow. It was not too long after I had heard him teaching that I was going to Jerusalem to sell some sheep. On the way into the town I saw a procession coming out of the gate. Well I knew what it was as soon as I came near for I saw the crosses and knew that some poor people were to be executed that day. But when I looked and saw Him among them, my heart was sick within me. I remember rushing out to try to stop them but the soldiers threw me back. I could only stand there in anguish wringing my hands while the horrible scene went on. And the people whom he had helped scoffed at Him! I called for the Lord on high to strike them dead and save Him, but all He said was ‘forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.” [scoffing centurions] And I watched biting my hands in anguish until the blood ran, but there was nothing I could do. And soon he was dead, and I wandered home in a daze, wishing that I were dead too. I don’t remember much about the next few days as I nursed my grief; I must have been almost out of my mind with sorrow. But then the great news began to spread around and I heard it and knew that it was true. The tomb where he had been laid was
empty; He had appeared again to Mary and to His disciples; He was not dead but lived. And then I knew what kind of a King he was; then I saw that He was the Son of God in truth, and understood why He had to carry the Cross. And my heart became joyous within me, and I felt a new power of God, and understood who He was because I had seen Him in His Son And then I began to remember what the angel had said on that first night when He was born, and understood how in spite of everything they could sing ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men’, for with Him we have found the power of God, which the prophets dreamed about and He lived.”

The old man sat quietly, staring again into the fire, his eyes lighted by a fire that was not reflected from the hearth. The story was over, and the little boy sighs, “Grandfather, that’s the most wonderful story in the whole world.” “That it is, lad, wonderful and beautiful,” comes the measured answer. “And not because I saw some of it happen, is it so wonderful to me and so precious; but because it lives in my heart. It must live in your heart, too, boy; and your son’s and his sons and in your friends’ and their friends’ as long as there are sheep in the fields and shepherds to tend them, until the whole world lives with the Christmas story in its heart. Then, my son, we will have the answer to the prayer we pray, Thy kingdom come; and find peace on earth, good will toward men.

[no bitterness no condemnation so with us what it means - suffering x (good vs evil) going down - holding up another]