

Heaven-Sent Help on the Road to Bethlehem – *Fr. Dean McFalls*

Last night, two dozen youth drove up from Planada (near Merced) to present the “Pastorela”. This traditional play dramatizes, with humor and verse, the journey of simple shepherds to Bethlehem. Called by the choir of angels to leave their flocks and to honor the newborn King, they encounter some major obstacles along the way. Satan and his side-kicks do everything they can to side-track the pilgrims. They offer tantalizing versions of the seven deadly sins. Again and again, St. Michael the Archangel intervenes. Without him, the shepherds would be mired in mortal sin, never reaching their destination.

Tuesday night, I had ample opportunity to reflect on the Pastorela. Driving from Tracy to Modesto following a communal penance service, I got stuck.

A dozen priests had traveled to hear countless confessions in preparation for the feast of Christmas. I was grateful to have helped people make their journey to Bethlehem with less baggage, or even to get them back on track.

Branching off on Ahern, which becomes 33, I entered a dense patch of fog.

Not knowing what to expect, I missed the 132 connection. Before long, I found myself in the middle of nowhere (apologies to the people of Westley).

Now the three wise men (or kings, as tradition has it) were led by the light of a rising star as they journeyed to the birthplace of the Messiah. So long as they could see the light, their footsteps were sure. But somehow they lost track, near Jerusalem, of their heavenly guide, and so had to ask directions.

We all wish they’d asked someone besides Herod, because the consequences were devastating (Matthew 2:1-12). They searched for light in the wrong place, and as a result, scores of innocent children died (v. 16-17). In light of their deadly mistake, I chose to consult a guardian angel whom I could trust.

“Take Grayson Road eastbound, then turn left on Shiloh. Watch out for a right angle turn to the right, then another to the left. You’ll know you’re on track if you reach Paradise.” Well, that sounded promising. It was 10:15pm and I was crawling through fog so dense I could only see a wall of shadows.

Stay on track and you’ll reach Paradise. But what if I couldn’t even see the road, let alone the sign for Shiloh? Determined to make up for lost time (I was heading for a convent’s lodging for priests in preparation for an early-

morning mass on Wednesday), I plowed ahead. Against all odds, I found Shiloh and managed, somehow, to figure out exactly where to make my turn.

Forewarned about the first right-angle road hazard ahead, I slowed down and squinted. There was the big yellow sign with the big black arrow. See, somebody knew that the lights would go out on the journey to Paradise.

But the second turn fooled me. Cautiously heeding the left turn arrow, I nevertheless failed to negotiate the right shoulder. I couldn't see it at all.

My beautiful angel-of-a-Toyota skidded off the road into a river of mud.

Great. Pitch black outside, freezing cold, stuck in the mud far from Paradise.

"Drive carefully," chimed my internet angel-guide over the phone - "you might have an accident." "I'll call you back later," I replied, furious. But my fears proved unfounded. The archangels came to my rescue, and I spun backwards out of the tar pit without any perceivable damage to my car.

Soon, there was Paradise Road, and then I recovered Hart, which led me to Maze Boulevard once again. From there, the convent was just minutes away.

"¿Te perdiste?" ("*Did you get lost?*") She had to go there. The nun waiting at the gate seemed to derive some secret delight from the sight of my mud-splattered car. Failing to invent a credible lie, I had to confess the truth.

But I also had to thank my angels who delivered me through the purgatory of one missed turn and miles of perilous wilderness, back to a place of hope.

Yes, the shepherds headed off to Bethlehem full of optimistic expectations. What they encountered on the road convinced them of their powerlessness to complete the journey alone. All of us can benefit from their experience.

Twenty-four years ago this Monday night, a small band of pilgrims walked slowly out from the walled city of Jerusalem. We had journeyed on foot for seventeen months, inspired by the song of angels inviting us to Bethlehem.

But between inspiration and arrival were seven thousand of miles of trials, temptations, and tribulations. More significantly, the last segment of our pilgrimage led us to Bethlehem the back way, since as a group perceived as political, we were not permitted to use the principal route. Our itinerary took us through hell. For miles, we endured the eerie howling of dogs and the stench of rotting flesh and burning garbage in the dump called *Gehennah*.

Ironically, the disgust we felt only reminded us of the heavenly joy that lay ahead. Arriving, finally, at the shepherd's grotto, we dropped our burdens and fell to our knees. Our French Franciscan cried aloud, "We are here!"

There, into a world of brokenness - promises, treaties, relationships, hearts, lives - had entered a child bathed in the light of glory. Here, in adoration of the newborn Prince of Peace, we would find our hopes and lives renewed.

And how the world needs renewal! This past Thursday night, I stood with a family in the county hospital as they said their last farewell to their son. A terrible accident had claimed his friend's life on Sunday, December 10th. With severe head injuries, Luis Eduardo Perez hung in the balance for ten long days. Family members made the distressing pilgrimage to his bedside, holding vigil and praying for miracles while the dense fog of death slowly closed in over the 19-year old boy. Although his body healed, gradually, so that he looked healthier at the end than when he first was brought to ICU, his brain's functioning yielded, progressively, to the internal hemorrhage.

We said our prayers and watched, helpless, as his gurney was wheeled by a team of medical angels to his place of rest. Leaving the family with a final blessing for their long journey ahead, I descended to exit the hospital. But on the way out, I had to stop before the magnificent Christmas tree standing vigil near the entrance. Drawing near, I read the dedication plaque. What I saw amazed me. The person for whom the tree was dedicated was named "Angelina". Her daughter, Nancy, won an award last year for being the most dedicated guardian angel ("cuddler") for newborn infants. And I had visited Angelina as she died, and was honored to help celebrate her funeral.

Yes, the journey to Bethlehem is long and full of pitfalls. But the God of Mercy always sends us angels to bring us home. Even Jesus, facing death by crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane, needed angelic companionship (Luke 22:43). So don't forget to call upon your angels. One might be right there at your side already. Last Wednesday, at the gym, a woman greeted me out of the blue: "Hello, Fr. Dean." She proceeded to tell me how she'd been caring for an elderly man in his dying days. Howard, Esmeralda said, had always voiced serious doubts about heaven and the afterlife. But as he drew close to his last days, he promised her: "If there is something up there, I will send you a sign. Someone will sing the 'ABC's' within two days."

Esmeralda, a devout member of the Legion of Mary, told me of how this promise came true. On the second day after Howard's death, she was taking an elderly person into Kaiser for a routine checkup. Suddenly, a child in the

waiting room began to sing. It was a song she hadn't heard for years. Yes, the child was singing the "ABC's" song, and Howard was safe in Paradise.

By now, it shouldn't surprise you, dear reader, to learn the last name of our friend Esmeralda. It is "Angel". "That really is my last name," she assured me. "My last name is 'Angel'." I would add this: "Your first name, as well, is Angel. And there are millions of you in this fogged-in universe. Without you, we would never be able to endure the purgatory of our lives, the hell of where this world is fast-going, and the long, arduous journey to Heaven.

As we prepare to celebrate the great feast of Christmas, let's remember that the birth of the Savior is not a spectator event. God the Father expects us to meet His Incarnate Son halfway. Yes, Jesus is the Eternal Word come down from heaven as Emmanuel, God-With-Us. Yes, He is the Good Shepherd, who will go out in search of His sheep. But He also calls us to "Come!"

Jesus still says: "Come to me and drink, all you who are thirsty" (John 7:37). "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). "Everyone whom the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the One who sent me. And this is the will of the One who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what He gave me, but that I should raise it on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day" (John 6:37-40).

In coming to Jesus in Bethlehem, we heed the words of the shepherds, who cried out to one another, "Let us go, then, to Bethlehem, to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us" (Luke 2:15).

And what stirred them from their ordinary lives to make that journey of faith? It was clearly the words of the angel: "Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.'

"And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests'" (2:8-14). Come, let us go to Bethlehem!

Author's Note: I would like to thank, publicly, the generous pastors and people of New Hope Church in Manteca. They have not only prayed for my parish community and encouraged me in my ministry, but also returned to us for a season an angel who came originally from the Catholic Church, has been returning with their support to that Church, but whose heart is first and foremost totally for Jesus. May the One Who came to us in Bethlehem continue to guide her on her journey of faith and in her call to missionary work. May the Lord of Eternal Hope continue to bless and prosper your fellowship of believers, and may we all work together to glorify His Name.

December 21, 2007, Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop, Ca