

- On the outskirts of modern-day Bethlehem is a place known as the Shepherds' Field. This is the place where the shepherds in tonight's Gospel were greeted by the angel with the glorious message that the Savior of the World had been born.
- It's a place of great natural beauty and peace. In fact, it's one of the unspoiled parts of the Holy Land that remains today very much like it was some 2000 years ago.
- Standing in those fields with their hills that gently roll toward Bethlehem, it is very easy to imagine the shepherds of old tending their flocks by night.
- Our Gospel tonight records that the first reaction the shepherds had upon seeing the angel speaking to them and the glory of the Lord shining around them was fear.
- Perhaps most of us would have had the same reaction upon seeing such a mighty sight. Yet, my friends, it is not to fear that we are called as we encounter the coming of our Messiah. Rather we are called to a life of joy and hope!
- Throughout the course of Advent, we have been waiting with joyful anticipation for the fulfillment of a promise: the promise of Christ's coming.
- Tonight, my friends, we see that promise fulfilled anew in our midst. Christ our mighty King, veiled in the tiny body of a baby, is born miraculously to a virgin.
- And though His coming is humble, it heralds for us who believe in Him a mighty hope: the hope for God's mercy; indeed, the hope for our eternal salvation.
- Throughout the course of Advent we've used different signs and symbols to mark our period of waiting and anticipation for the coming of the Lord. Perhaps the best known of these symbols is the Advent wreath.
- Wreaths have always been symbolic of victory and glory, and therefore they are a fitting symbol of Christ's coming glory, of His victory over sin and death. But the symbolism of the Advent wreath goes beyond this.
- The Advent wreath also calls to mind the tension that exists between light and darkness, and it calls to mind the long time when people lived in spiritual darkness, waiting for the coming of the Messiah, the light of the world.
- Each year in Advent, as the days grow shorter and the nights grow longer, we wait once again in darkness for the coming of the Lord: both His historical coming in the mystery of the Incarnation, and His final coming at the end of time.
- For each of the past four Sundays we have set alight a new candle as a sign of our hope and joy in the coming of the One Who Is the Light of the World.
- In addition to marking our vigil for our Lord's coming, the candles of our Advent wreath have also been a poignant reminder to us that, as the followers of Christ, we are called to be lights that stand boldly against the darkness of our world.
- Thus along with the hope and joy that we are naturally called to practice this beautiful Christmas season, the coming of Christ calls us to a life of courage as well.
- While it is, perhaps, easy to view our current world with fear and pessimism because of the faltering economy, the wars, our anxiety over health care, the continuing erosion of our Judeo-Christian values and the strident rise of secularism, we must not allow fear and pessimism to reign in our hearts.
- Rather than giving into fear and pessimism, we must courageously proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ, showing Him to be not only the sole means of man's salvation, but also the answer to all our desires.

- You see, my friends, what Christmas shows us is that not only is Jesus Emmanuel: God-with-us. Christmas is our annual reminder that Jesus is also one of us! He is the God-Made-Man and the Word-Made-Flesh.
- That is what we celebrate today in celebrating the Incarnation of our Lord. We celebrate the reality that 2000 years ago, in the little town of Bethlehem, our Lord took on our human flesh.
- Born in the cruel comforts of a lowly manger, the long-awaited Messiah came into our world as a tiny infant wrapped in swaddling clothes.
- But do not be fooled! While He appears to us tonight as a tiny babe in the arms of His virginal mother, He is a mighty warrior who has come with salvation in His hands.
- And come Easter, the gentle wood of the manger upon which He sleeps will be transformed into the life-giving wood of the cross, upon which He will die a horrible death to save us from our sins.
- Thus, beyond all the gift-giving and celebrating with family and friends, Christmas is our yearly reminder that God is alive, that God is real, that He loves us, and that He comes to save us. And this is the reason for our courage.
- My dear friends in Christ, the world is dark right now. But it is not hopeless. Jesus Christ, the true light of the world, has been born for us this night.
- And just as the days are now beginning to grow longer and conquer the night, so too must our joy, our hope, and our courage grow stronger within us so that the light of Christ which shines in our hearts may be seen by all.
- Let us pray tonight, my friends, for these gifts of joy, hope, and courage. Let us pray that each of us may stand as a light against the darkness of the world.
- Take courage, my friends, and may the peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of His Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.