

WHILE SHEPHERDS WATCHED THEIR FLOCKS

Nahum Tate, 1652-1715

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you;
He is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:11)

It is doubtful that there is any Christmas hymn more widely known than that of Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady, "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night." It has been described as a word-picture of great beauty. Nahum Tate was once a poet-laureate; he died in a debtors' prison. Nicholas Brady was once a royal chaplain; he ended his days in poverty. Yet these two, bequeathing nothing else, left us a legacy which, coming into royal home and humble cottage, has spread its warm glow across nearly 300 years. No doubt the popularity of this carol has been enhanced by the tuneful melody, which was adapted from a work by master composer George Frederick Handel. The Christmas story bids us leave behind the complex and dwell for a moment with a mother whose heart leaps with joy as she hears a baby cry; and with shepherds into whose fear and awe came the assuring words, "I bring you good tidings of great joy." The entire Advent season should be filled with solemn rejoicing as we contemplate anew God's great gift, providing the means whereby sinful human beings might live eternally.

While shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the
ground, the angel of the Lord came down, and glory shone around,
and glory shone around.

"Fear not!" said he, for mighty dread has seized their troubled mind;
"glad tidings of great joy I bring to you and all mankind."

"To you in David's town this day is born, of David's line,
the Savior who is Christ the Lord, and this shall be the sign;

"The heav'nly Babe you there shall find to human view displayed,
all meanly wrapt in swathing bands and in a manger laid."

All glory be to God on high, and to the earth be peace:
Good will henceforth from heav'n to men begin and never cease!"