



On your marks

If you're on the look-out for a new reading for a Christmas carol service, this poem might fit the bill. It's a retelling of the shepherds' story in a modern context.

Get set

This reflective poem reimagines the reading from Luke 2:8-20, swapping shepherds for security guards watching over a building by night. If you're using it in a carol service, it could follow either a carol based on the shepherds' story or the reading from the gospel of Luke.

Go!

A shudder of angels
Watching over their flocks... of screens by night,
the security guards monitored the lonely hours
in the high-rise office blocks, not far from Bethlehem.
But there was nothing to report.
No break in; no break out.
All was safe.

Nightwatchman work is a strange occupation -
no skill required other than to stay awake while others sleep;
to keep alert and guard against the unexpected.
It's an unattractive job with antisocial hours,
serving the great financial houses
that feed the temples of Mammon.

And so they watched, on duty, in silence and in solitude;
while digital images flickered, the CCTV jumped channels and eyelids drooped,
as black-and-white movie stars from yesteryear came out to grace the TV screen.
But there was nothing to report.
No break in; no break out.
All was safe.

Until that night - the night that changed everything -
when suddenly the electric sparked, lights flashed,
the pictures danced and grew bright with strangeness;
when every screen faltered, froze and then faded into a dazzling brightness.
Was this a break in or a break out?
Something was happening.
There was something to report.



Alarm bells rang inside the watchmen's heads but they couldn't move,
entranced by what they saw. For, lo,
a great shudder of angels appeared in each and every monitor,
a fearful sight that told them not to be afraid.
'Something glorious has happened,' they said;
but not up in the luxury penthouse suites above,
nor within the vast executive board rooms below,
nor yet in the open-plan office spaces elsewhere in the building;
but in the basement,
among the dirt and debris, swept out of sight.

Something had come to overturn from underneath
the well-oiled machines of human commerce;
to redistribute wealth and wisdom and wonder,
and reconcile accounts for all.
They should go. Now. Abandon their soulless work.
Go and discover the new thing,
wrapped in strips of computer packaging
and lying in a cardboard box.

So they broke out and found the one who had broken in –
an intruder bathed in neon from the streetlamp outside.
And it was just as they had been told.
Without identity badge or appointment,
he had bypassed all the normal protocols
and was in the building,
undoing their security and ours.

As one day he would go on to unbalance the old statements,
turn profits into losses
and re-audit the transactions of all our lives.
Now this was something to report.
A break in, and a break out.
Something had happened.
And from now on the world's security would never be safe again.