

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.(Luke 2:8)

It was to such folk, ordinary working people, that the joyful news of Christmas was first announced. God bless them! There they were, earning their daily bread by the sweat of their brow: It was to them that the Lord directed his angels, like an arrow straight to them, to tell them the glad tidings of Christmas.

Bible scholars say that St. Luke is a historian, and so, as befits a scholar, he opens his Christmas story by placing these mighty deeds in historical context. He begins, then, by speaking of Caesar Augustus:

*And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.(Luke 2:1)*

A mighty man, indeed, was this Caesar Augustus. He brought order out of the chaos following the assassination of Julius Caesar. He ruled Rome for forty-one years, and he forged the *Pax Romana* — the “Roman Peace” that endured for two-and-a-half centuries. He was a great man, but the angels sped right on by him to get to the folk whose station in life is more akin to our own and to those of most of humanity. The angels by-passed Caesar Augustus, never detoured to peek in on King Herod, never lingered to chat with the geniuses of the day, nor the philosophers — just hastened on to ordinary working folk tending their jobs.

Months before this, back when Mary was so very happy at the Annunciation that she burst forth into song, she had rejoiced in this peculiar divine inclination toward the lowly. In her *Magnificat*, she sang of it. It was her chief melody:

*And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden...( Luke 1:46-48, KJV)*

And in Martin Luther’s commentary on Mary’s Song, he says that Mary is inviting our attention to a chief characteristic of our God: that our God is one who takes time to regard the lowly ones of earth. Luther puts it this way — a strange thought:

...the farther one is beneath Him, the better does He see him.

I am near-sighted, and so the farther one is from me, the less I am able to see that one. I am near-sighted, I fear, both in my eyes and in my heart, so that I tend to regard those who are close to me — my family, my parish, my friends – but too often to forget those who are far away. But not so with God. With him, it is the reverse. The Bible puts it best in Psalm 138:

*Though the LORD be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly:( KJV Psalm 138:6)*

Though the Lord sits with the cherubim, he regards the lowly. His vision hastens on down to them. And when the most magnificent news this world has ever heard is to be shared on earth, why, the Lord dispatches his angels to them, to the lowly working man or woman.

When I have heard some good news, I dash off to tell my wife Carol. I bet you do the same: when you are happy, you hurry to tell your beloved. And that’s how it seems to be with God: when he has “good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people,” he seems to hasten off to tell those for whom he has special affection<sup>1</sup>. And so it, that the Christmas message is first announced to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night.

This, my friends, is comfort and encouragement for us: It means that Christmas passes no one by, no matter how lowly they might be. It is good news for the whole world, “good tidings of great joy” meant for all of humanity, including the most ordinary of us. The angels sped on, not to the saints, not to the kings, not to the heroes, but to plain people like you and me.

The shepherds: I lift them up for us not because they are high, nor low, but because they are *ordinary*. They are good representatives of humanity. I imagine their daily work to be full measure of both joy and weariness, like many of our

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<sup>1</sup> John Henry Newman observed this in his sermon “Religious Joy: A Christmas Sermon.”

jobs in this world. They are shepherds, probably like their fathers before them. They need not travel abroad to learn their craft, they need not travel to cities. Their university is the pasture and the hills. They might be poets and thinkers at heart, but if so, it is no necessity of their job. They need to be brave, so that they can defend their flock from wolf and bear, but they need not be artistic or creative or even particularly verbal. I mean, if they delivered a discourse, their sheep would not answer them back anyway. I imagine that much of their work was routine and could be done in a day-dreaming sort of way. The big, wide world, with its commerce and sailing ships, its many people and languages, its wars and tumults, its glories and its stresses — all these things could pretty much remain the big, wide world, beyond the ken of the shepherd. His world was simpler.

On the other hand, his world also had its measure of joy, peace, and beauty. In our city, it is hard for us to see the sunrise or the sunset — hard to see the blush on the horizon, hard to see the orange, pink, and reds of the dawn, hard to see the darkening reds of the sunset. But the shepherd could see those things daily. His horizon was unobstructed.

For us, it is hard to maintain our powers of hearing. The noise of the city, the blowing of the truck horns, the screech of the subway rails, the music in our earbuds, it all preoccupies our minds and dims our hearing. But the shepherd could keep both a keen sense of sound and a mind free to wander where it will, to enjoy the sights and the sounds, and maybe even some favorite texts of scripture.

So, I am not saying that the Lord dispatched his angels simply to folk lost in misery, but rather to *ordinary* folk. It is not their misery, nor their glory, that we should cherish, but simply that they are men and women, boys and girls like you and me. To each one, whatever our circumstances or station in life, the good news of Christmas has come:

*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (Luke 2:14)*

And what are these glad tidings? Why is this old earth invited to peace? Why, it is because of the Saviour:

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:11)*

One of the ancient church fathers spoke of Christmas using the metaphor of thunder. Ephrem the Syrian (306 – 373) was his name. In a passage

praising Mary, he described Christmas as the stilling of thunder. The passage goes this way:

*A wonder is Thy Mother. The Lord entered her, and became a servant: the Word entered her, and became silent within her; thunder entered her, and His voice was still: (Hymn 8)*

I love this mention of thunder. You might remember that a few weeks back, we heard thunder here in the city. It was November or early December. Thunder and lightning belong to the summer, not to the winter, but there we had it, rain and thunder so very late in the season.

Well, on that first Christmas we also had thunder in the winter, except that the thunder became still. The thunder became small. The thunder became a babe in his mother's arms.

The Bible had often spoken of God as thunder. The giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, for example, had been accompanied by the roar and shaking of thunder:

*And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud: so that all the people that was in the camp trembled. (Ex 19:16, KJV)*

*And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. <sup>19</sup>And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die. (Ex 20:18-19, KJV)*

The people were terrified, you see, to have God draw so close to earth. But now, on Christmas Eve, how can you be frightened of God, for who can fear a baby?

Dear Friends, if your world should be shaken in some way, if reality should be thundering to you that you are in trouble or that you are of no-account, well, then, disregard such thunder. It is not God, it is not the last word, for on Christmas the thunder was still, the very Lord of heaven and earth drew near to you, as meek as a lamb, as innocent as a baby, as full of love for you as the sun in the sky is full of light and warmth. Baby Jesus is the reason to be encouraged about *everything!* And this same Saviour and Master, Jesus Christ, is the one person on the face of the earth worth living for and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.