

December 20, 2009
The Quiet Ones of Christmas: The Shepherds
Luke 2:8-20

The shepherds are another one of those groups of characters whom we think we know so well. They figure prominently in every Christmas production. But let's try to look at them with fresh eyes ... or, more thematically keeping with our perspective this year, let's listen to them with fresh ears.

1. "Let's Go ..."

The only direct quote we have from the shepherds is this: *"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."* (2:15)

But this is not where the story begins. It begins with *"There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified"* (2:8-9). It begins with fear!

Fear is a big issue in most of our lives: fear of what has happened, fear of what might happen. We may be able to identify with the great French philosopher Montaigne who said, *"My life has been full of terrible misfortunes ... most of which never happened."* The truth is that very few of the things we fear actually come to pass. Or if bad things do happen, they inevitably are not nearly as bad as we fear they will be.

But fear cripples us. It eats away our health: symptoms of stress include memory problems, inability to concentrate, poor judgment, seeing only the negative, anxious or racing thoughts, constant worrying, moodiness, irritability or short temper, agitation, inability to relax, feeling overwhelmed, sense of loneliness and isolation, depression or general unhappiness, aches and pains, diarrhea or constipation, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, frequent colds, acid reflux, ulcers, eating too much/too little, sleeping too much/too little, isolating yourself from others, procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities, using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax, nervous habits (nail biting, pacing), panic attacks, etc., etc.

The encouraging thing about these shepherds is that they didn't exhibit any of these behaviours ... they went. Their response was to face their fears. They did not know what to expect. But rather than worry or fret, they went. And what they discovered was the greatest blessing - greater than any they could imagine - their Saviour. When we face a fearful situation, the best thing we can do is face it. Not fret. Not worry. Not lose sleep. But go. We may discover that thing we fear is a tremendous blessing. We may actually discover Jesus during those stressful times ...

2. Spread the word

"When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." (2:17-18)

What had been told them? *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (2:10-12)*

The antidote to fear is Jesus. Jesus is our *"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."* Whatever our fears - Jesus - God - can handle them.

What does Jesus have to say about stress and worry? *"Don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." (Matthew 6:31-34)*

Most of our worries either come from things that have happened in the past - or things we are concerned about in the future. But the past is the past. We cannot change it. And the future is the future - it's not here yet. Montrealer, Sir William Osler - who organized the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford lived by the maxim of living in "day-tight compartments" - shutting off the past and the future and doing the best possible job of today. The best possible way to prepare for tomorrow is to concentrate with all your energy and enthusiasm of doing today's work very well. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, *"Anyone can carry his burden, however hard, until nightfall. Anyone can do his work, however hard, for one day. Anyone can live sweetly, patiently, lovingly, purely, till the sun goes down. And this is all that life really means."*

Jesus also said, *"Give us today our daily bread"* (Matthew 6:11). That prayer only asks for today's bread. It doesn't complain about the stale bread we had to eat yesterday; and it doesn't say, *"Oh God, it has been a late harvest this year and with climate change there may be a drought next year - so where will next fall's bread come from - or suppose I lose my job - oh, God, how could I get bread then?"* Jesus simply teaches us to pray for today's bread only. Because today's bread is the only bread you can actually eat.

We are the beloved children of our Father. God is good. So ... *"Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."*

The good news we have to share is that God is God; He is good; He has come among us; and we can give Him all our yesterdays, all our tomorrows - and all our todays with complete confidence. And our task is to the best we can right here, right now, "*Seeking the Kingdom of God above all else, and living righteously.*"

3. Glorify and praise God

"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told." (2:20)

This picks up on the angels' theme, of course. *"A great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.'" (2:12-13)*

When people meet Jesus - really meet Jesus - they are moved to worship. How can we do anything but? When you discover that God is God. When you discover that God loves His creation, including you! When you discover that God has come among us, lived a life like ours, experienced all the temptations, emotions, and challenges of life - even the final challenge of death itself - and overcome all of these ... when you discover that God forgives you, loves you, journeys with you, encourages you, teaches you, empowers you, gives you a vision of a life that can mean something ... you can do nothing else but worship!

The challenge of Christmas, of course, is to appreciate that Jesus is more - so much more - than just a cute baby in a manger. And so ... we have to choose how to respond ...

4. In response ...

There are two different responses to Jesus:

"All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them" (2:18). I can hear all sorts of things and be amazed. I can hear that the Edmonton Oilers won three hockey games on the road and be amazed ... but who cares? It's not going to make a difference to my life. I can hear news about the Copenhagen Conference on climate change and be amazed at what I, personally can do to make a difference ... but if I don't do anything about my lifestyle, what does it matter? I can celebrate Christmas - sing the carols, hear the stories, enjoy the warm, fuzzy feelings ... but if I don't allow Jesus to come into my life - to set my priorities, shape my values, and determine my decisions - What difference does it make? I can know all about Jesus - I can recite the stories - I can enjoy the emotions - but if I am not prepared to let the One who knows me inside out, and the universe inside out, and life inside out actually be lord of my life - who cares?

On the other hand, *"Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart"* (2:19). It's a step further to treasure these things, to ponder them, and then to act on them. It's a process. Mary takes time to think, to ponder, to wrestle with the implications of the true reality that she - and all of us - have to face. God has come.

We need to wrestle with who Jesus is ... and what He means in our lives:

- *"I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life."* (John 5:24)
- *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."* (John 6:35)
- *"I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."* (John 8:12)
- *"I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die."* (John 11:25-26)
- *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6)

What will I do with Jesus? Am I just amazed at what I hear? Or will I actually live and act as a person who knows that this Jesus is God - is MY God - is the Saviour - is MY Saviour - is Lord - is MY Lord!

5. So what do we do?

Stephen Leacock wrote, *"How strange it is, our little procession of life! The child says, 'When I am a big boy.' But what is that? The big boy says, 'When I grow up.' And then, grown up, he says, 'When I get married.' But to be married, what is that after all? The thought changes to, 'When I'm able to retire.' And then, when retirement comes, he looks back over the landscape traversed; a cold wind seems to sweep over it; somehow he missed it all, and it is gone. Life, we learn too late, is in the living, in the tissue of every day and hour."* That's an antidote to stress.

But it's also a call to take Christmas seriously. If life is in the living, will I live it with Jesus? If life is lived day-by-day, will I ask every day, "How can I live today for Jesus?" *"This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."* (Psalm 118:24)

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