

Scriptures: Psalm 96; Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Sidelined By Consumerism

Welcome to Christmas Eve, friends! We've traveled through our Advent journey – filled with anticipation and expectation, of Christ's coming. And now, this most holy night has finally arrived, when we celebrate again the coming of God Incarnate in the manger at Bethlehem. So often we hear the Christmas story – we know it by heart – and because we hear it year after year, it becomes old news. We trivialize it, and in so doing, we risk losing the deep meaning of it.

It's been sidelined for the last hundred years at least, by consumerism, and yet, the weary world that rejoices at our Savior's birth, isn't really all that different now than it was over two thousand years ago when He was born in Bethlehem. In fact, most of the world is still oblivious to what happened that night in Bethlehem, so long ago, and why it's so important to us, and to the world today. The same thing can be said of the other major holiday in the Church – Easter. The significance of it is veiled by distractions like egg hunts and bunnies, that entice us to take our eyes off the One who loved us enough to lay His glory aside, and enter into absolute poverty and then take the nails all for our sake.

Caesar, a Census, and the Shepherds

We see how out of touch the world was, and is, in the Gospel lesson we heard tonight. "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world," (Luke 2:1). Caesar thought he was large and in charge, and was seeking to gain more money from the Jewish lands – well all the lands, really – that he had occupied with his armies. Couple that with how the census is for the "entire Roman world" – imagine that – the whole world, as most common people knew it in that era, belonged to Rome. We start to see just how gutsy the politicians in those days were. They had a lot of nerve. The politicians haven't changed much – they'd like us to believe they know more about what's going on in the world than what God does!

Because of the census, everyone has to go to their ancestral homes, so Joseph takes a very pregnant Mary to Bethlehem, and when they get there "the time came for the Baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn," (verses 6 and 7). I'm not certain what the word is in the original Greek language, but the ancient Church believed Christ was born in a cave that was being used as a stable. That makes a lot of sense, considering what we heard next, that "there were shepherds

living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night,” (verse 8). The angel appeared to those drowsy shepherds, and they were scared to death!

They're told, “Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior 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,” (verses 10-12). There's a lot to unpack in those few short verses that we miss most of the time today, because we don't understand the Jewish religion or culture. First off, let's talk about the shepherds themselves. These guys were rough guys. They weren't at the top of the social hierarchy of the day. They were in charge of keeping track of the sheep that were used in the ceremonial sacrifices which occurred in the temple at Jerusalem.

The Manger

The angel tells them they'll find Jesus wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. In those days – especially in the caves surrounding Bethlehem which were used for stables – depressions in the stone floors would have been used as mangers for the animals being kept there. I read an article that said these shepherds – when the ewes were birthing lambs, if they saw a lamb birthed without any blemish or birth defects – they would stick them down in the mangers of the stables. This kept them from getting bruised up, so they could be taken to the temple as soon as possible and used for the sacrifice for the sins of the people. Don't miss this, friends – the angel was telling those shepherds that night exactly why Christ had come into the world – to pay the penalty for our sin.

The next thing that happens in Luke's account, is that the heavenly host appears, and sings praise to God. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests,” (verse 14), or to put it another way, in the words of Edmund Sears, ““Peace on the earth, good will to men, from heaven's all gracious King, The world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.”¹ The angels leave, the shepherds decide to rush off to Bethlehem to see what all the midnight commotion is all about. As they say, “Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about,” (verse 15).

They end up finding Mary, Joseph, and Jesus exactly as the angel described. An interesting thing happens then, which I don't think I've ever heard anyone talk about at Christmas, so I will this evening. These rough and tumble shepherds “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,” (verses 17-18). Friends, we don't give credit to those first missionaries who spread the news on that first Christmas night. The

¹ Sears, Edmund, “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 218.

shepherds were the ones running around, telling everyone they knew, about the great thing God had done by clothing Himself in flesh and blood, and becoming one of us.

The shepherds – because they’re caring for the sacrificial lambs, the sin offerings at the temple – they’re guilty by association. They’re dirty. They’re sinful. They’re the riffraff. The outcasts and unwanted. God, in His grace and mercy, tells the news to them before anyone else on the night it happened. He comes into the mess – the mess with greedy politicians, the filthy animal stalls, and into the mess of your life and my life – all because of His great and unending love for us.

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

Mary treasures all of it up in her heart, and the shepherds give glory and praise to God – it’s the best news they’ve ever heard. It’s the best news the world has ever heard. That Christ came into the world to bring life, freedom from sin and death, and restored relationships with God and others. That’s good news, and the world is just as desperate to hear it today, as it was on that first night long ago!

In a moment, we’re going to sing a familiar Christmas carol, *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*. Written after the closing days of the Mexican-American War, in the mid-1800’s, as a poem by Edmund Sears, it includes a stanza that’s not in our hymnal. It’s a commentary on how sin-sickened the world continues to be. It’s still very appropriate, and could be said of our time. He writes, “But with the woes of sin and strife, The world has suffered long; Beneath the angel-strain have rolled, Two thousand years of wrong. And man, at war with man, hears not The love-song which they bring; O hush the noise, ye men of strife, And hear the angels sing!”

And so, on this most holy of nights, as we gather around His table again with all His saints and give glory and praise to Emmanuel, God-with-us, we’re mindful of being surrounded by a world still blinded by the darkness of sin. A world that’s desperate to see the Light. Friends, we are the bearers of His light, and His love. And someday, “Peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.” Jesus does not promise us an easy life, but our life with Him in it, promises to be most advantageous and adventurous. In receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion this evening, my prayer for you is that you’ll be energized and equipped to follow our Lord faithfully on the adventure He’s laid out before us, of making Him known to the world! Merry Christmas precious ones of God!

Prayer: Christ, our God, whom humble shepherds worshiped at a manger, You are holy and Most High, merciful and mighty. Startle us to wakefulness, that we may rejoice in Your new and glorious dawn, and, in Your holy name, act to mend this suffering world. Amen.