

SERMON- Christmas Eve (C)

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Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

December 24, 2024

Psalms 96-

Luke 2:1-14

OPENER:

Imagine a picture frame wide enough to view the entire cosmos,
the frame then narrows down to the Milky Way Galaxy,
then our Solar System,
then Planet Earth,
then Europe,
then what was the Roman Empire,
then Syria, then the region of Judea,
then getting smaller to Bethlehem,
then to this one particular Inn,
then finally to the Manger, the “most famous animal feeding trough in history.”¹

On Christmas we get to go on *that* journey, as the entirety of existence is funneled/telescoped down to this one remarkable scene of the birth of the Christ child.

God's “got the whole world in his hands” and Luke helps us to understand that by starting big and then narrowing down and narrowing down to this one scene.

By doing this, Luke “puts *us* in our place” so to speak, because Mary and Joseph and Jesus had been “put in *their* place”—forcibly by the Roman Empire. At the mercy of this foreign government, they must make the trip to Bethlehem as a reminder of their own insignificance and smallness.

God, of course, has other plans and interrupts this bureaucratic nightmare to share his dream for the world, this plan for salvation, as if to say:
“Watch what I can do.... Watch *me* put everything in its place.”

NATIVITY:

Notice also though that when we are telescoped and transported to this scene, right into this moment where heaven and earth meet, right into the moment of the Incarnation, “capital ‘I’.”

We don't actually hear much about the main event, the birth itself. We get maybe a half a verse, short and sweet: “and she gave birth to her first-born son.”²

¹ Wright, N. T. 2004. *Luke for Everyone*. London: SPCK. 21.

² Luke 2.7a

We don't get to go all the way into the delivery room...

we get close, but are left in the waiting room outside.

There we hear a lot of details around the birth, where Jesus came from, how we got there, what he represents. But we are stuck outside in the waiting room.

We hear about Shepherds, and Angels, and swaddles, but not about the birth itself, "Mary treasured that and pondered it in her heart."³

Just as well, Mary will bear and suffer enough, within her heart is the final place that we don't quite get transported or invited into.

SHEPHERDS:

Our journey instead gets us only as close as the Shepherds.

Growing up I always wanted to be a Shepherd in the Annual Christmas pageant at the church I went to.

Instead, I remember being "stuck" as an angel for what seemed like ages.

And I don't know what I had against being an angel, it's a pretty good gig.

I guess I didn't like the white costume or the tinsel halo, and I looked up to and idolized the older boys who got to wear the bathrobes and carry the crooks.

Every year, though, it seemed I was told that I too young to be a shepherd.

My son earlier today followed in my footsteps, was a shepherd already at age 7.

But my adolescent self would actually have been very disappointed to witness what the shepherds do at the end of our scene.

What do the shepherds do?

They "sing and glorify the lord."

They do the same thing as the angels do, they become the messengers of God.

These dirty rustic shepherds become the heavenly chorus, become angels, they change costumes, the whole scene having been zoomed into where they happen to be, they projected it back out, sharing through song for all the world to hear

Now at first glance it would seem odd that God would narrow it down to shepherds, because shepherds were just so ordinary, so pedestrian in the grand scheme of things. Take it from Cowherd!

We have the benefit of hindsight, we know the Good Shepherd, to know that this is

³ Luke 2.19.

another example of God “putting people in their place.”
From the Bible, we should have had some idea that
“God’s favor on the least likely is a (big) theme....
Israel was the least likely,
as was David (himself a shepherd),
and Mary, and Paul, and even Jesus himself.”⁴

God’s vision for the future is dominated by these powerful reversals,
this we have just heard in Mary’s *Magnificat*, and we will hear all throughout this
Child’s life where the “first will be last and the last will be first.”⁵

REVERSAL

Back to the Picture frame.

The shepherds are the ones that start the process of reversing our journey, having zoomed into this solitary scene of the nativity, the shepherds react by retracing the steps, by sharing the good news to the countryside and then to the city, and then “Go tell it on the Mountain, over the hills and everywhere” sharing what they have seen, until it reaches the whole world.

Our job, if you want to call it that, is to do what the shepherds did, is to simply share it.

So we share the fact that God’s love inbreaks all around us in surprising ways.

We share the fact that we have seen heaven and earth meet. Share the fact that the “world has been turned upside down” and that through God anything is possible.⁶

We share the fact that the best laid plans of the Empire were inverted, that, through the census Caesar thought he was “putting everyone in their place” but instead he set in motion the very events that would lead to the demise of his Empire.

MARY

That simple act of sharing should be our response, because few of us can be Mary who “keeps the things and ponders them in her heart.”

⁴ Craddock, Fred B. 1992. “Christmas, First Proper (Christmas Eve/ Day).” *Preaching through the Christian Year (Year B)*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 33.

⁵ Luke 1.46-55; Matthew 20.16, Luke 13.30

⁶ Acts 17.6.

For most of us, we are the twelve-year-old child in the bathrobe, confusedly transported to this place and, having seen this miracle, through our befuddlement and uncertainty, we bear witness to Christ having been born in our hearts and in our minds, and in our very beings.

Mary, again, understood it further.

She knew that this child would not remain in this place, but would rather transcend the scene in Bethlehem, would captivate crowds in Galilee, would make it all the way to Jerusalem for a death that would send shock waves throughout the world.

CONCLUSION:

The Picture Frame then becomes a kind of holograph, the Nativity is some sort of kaleidoscope as (geographically) Rome is joined to Bethlehem, Christ is everywhere. Bethlehem is joined to Herndon is joined to all of creation. Christ's birth cannot be hidden in a corner;

It does that because "The world is God's, and the gospel is for God's world. The good news does not belong to anyone (even the church), which may decide then to share it with the world.

Rather, Mary's baby is God's YES to the world, which includes (all of) us."⁷

So, in the famous words of Howard Thurman, thinking about having been transported to this scene and what to do next.

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,*

*the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*⁸

AMEN

⁷ Craddock, 32.

⁸ Thurman, Howard. 1973. "The Work of Christmas" in *The Mood of Christmas*. New York: Harper & Row.