

A Light in the Darkness

Luke 2:1-20

The Vigil of Christmas/ Year C

December 24, 2009

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.

If there is ever a time of year that we could call a celebration of lights, surely it is now, during December. Over the past several weeks, countless television stations have invited viewers not only to send in pictures of their outdoor Christmas decorations but to announce the number of light-bulbs contained within them, sometimes up to several million. We ooh and ah over the lights; the more the better. There is nothing quite so heartwarming as driving through our neighborhoods to look at the outdoor light displays. Even in those communities in which we are, more or less, strangers, we feel a glowing welcome radiating from their twinkling brightness. Should we be unable or uncomfortable in our ability to drive at night, we can still appreciate the pageantry of Christmas lights. The internet is filled with numerous videos featuring the tiny bulbs emblazoned across roof tops and cascading over trees and shrubbery. Some of them are even synchronized to blink in rhythm to the music of Christmas carols. All that being said, there is, in turn, nothing that quite so dampens one's holiday cheer as turning onto a street that is shrouded in darkness, where no one has displayed the warmth of welcome. The prophet Isaiah, in this evening's first reading, announces that "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." Far more than mere lights on a string, this Light we welcome into our midst is the divine son. He is "the glorious appearing of our great God" as Saint Paul states in his letter to Titus.

Only twice a year does the church gather in the darkness of night to celebrate the mystery of salvation. How odd that it is at night, when most people are asleep and all is quiet, that God chooses to burst into our mortality, that he enters willingly our all-too-human dominion. To hear Isaiah tell it, Christ comes among us with great authority. He is the "Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end." And yet, for all of these grand titles and lofty statements, the arrival of this "Coming One," his advent into our lives, is a contradiction, a puzzle, a mystery of the highest order. We hail him as the Son of God born to a faltering world, but yet who among us has ever heard of a divine birth? Gods are not born. Gods are gods. Who, in their right mind, would ever suppose that God, in his infinity, would choose to constrict himself into something as insignificant, finite and fragile as a human infant? In her novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, the author Flannery O'Connor catches something of our wonder and bewilderment. She writes:

"God told the world he was going to send it a king and the world waited. The world thought, a golden fleece will do for his bed. Silver and gold and peacock tails, a thousand suns in a peacock tail will do for his crib. His mother will ride a four-horned white beast and use the sunset for her cape. She'll trail it behind her over the ground and let the world pull it to pieces, a new one every evening. [Then] Jesus came on cold straw,

Jesus was warmed by the breath of an ox. ‘Who is this?’ the world said. ‘Who is this blue-cold child and this woman, plain as the winter? Is this the Word of God, this blue-cold child?’ We can appreciate the world’s astonishment, its wonder and disbelief, for there is a part of us, if we are honest, which wonders too. Who is this child? Can he possibly be the child of whom Isaiah speaks in his prophecies? Is He going to shatter the yoke that burdens us? Is He going to break the bar which lays across our shoulders and remove from us the rod of our oppressors? Is the government really going to be on his shoulders? How is this child going to accomplish all this? He hardly seems up to the task.

From Saint Luke’s perspective, Christ’s birth appears to be far more inconvenient than auspicious. In his gospel, there are no palaces draped with damask curtains to shelter this new-born child, not even a fleabag motel with stained upholstery, only a back-alley stable filled with moldy hay and animal dung. His mother is an impoverished, unmarried, teenage girl, whose very conception of him is deemed something of a local scandal. His earthly father is a poor carpenter. His parents are, by and large, expendable people belonging to a despised and conquered nation. Their existence is of no consequence to the powers that be. Imperial Rome certainly takes no notice of them. They are less than chess pieces, less than play things, to the Emperor Augustus, whose very whims can disorder the world and force the people of his empire to take to the roads. Jesus and his family are simply objects to be inventoried, like pigs belonging to the imperial kitchens. We wouldn’t even find the holy family in the village of Bethlehem, if it wasn’t for the census decreed by the Emperor. Christ’s birth is hardly physically or prophetically opportune. After all, the prophecies of Isaiah suggest a powerful king born to a royal court, not some squalling baby shivering in a feeding trough in the middle of a Podunk town. Nevertheless, it is in Bethlehem, far away from the halls of power, that the crack in the universe widens, that the hopes and fears of all the years begin to meet, that the expectations of the prophets are realized, that the advent of the unexpected occurs, that the Light of the World breaks forth.

The first to witness the Light’s radiant brilliance are the shepherds tending their flocks on the outskirts of town. How interesting, that once again, it is at the fringes, at the margins, at the boundaries where our God makes himself known first? In a sermon preached on Christmas Eve in 1978, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, stated that “no one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything look down on others, those who have no need even of God- for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf will have that someone. That someone is God, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God.” The shepherds serve to exemplify this “poverty of spirit.” They encounter the unexpected, this night. Angels, without pretense, appear to them in the heavens announcing “good news of great joy for all the people.” The shepherds could have easily ignored the angels as mere figments of their imagination. They could have concluded that the darkness and the stars were playing tricks on them during this long winter night. Much like the famed Ebenezer Scrooge, in Charles Dickens *A Christmas Carol*, they could have chalked-up their unearthly visitors to an “undigested bit of beef.”

Instead, something stirs within their hearts. The announcement of God's presence, the proclamation of God's in-breaking kingdom arouses within them more than a mere curiosity. Hopefully, the angel's proclamation does the same for us. The shepherds respond "with haste" to the strange message they hear from the angels. They act completely out of character, but then encountering the unexpected can often cause one to act out of character. They leave their sheep, their livelihood as it were, and race back to town. One cannot help but wonder what the more respectable citizens of Bethlehem thought when they saw the shepherds running in the streets. After all, the shepherds may be the poor of the poor, the dregs of society, and in some cases, the criminal element. They may reek of sweat and wood smoke. Their skin may be tinged with the odors of the barnyard but, on the whole, they are hardly prone to flights of fancy. In tonight's gospel, what becomes clear is that the shepherd's openness, some would say foolishness, when it comes to the word of God leads them into the divine presence. Their willingness to hear the prompting of the angels brings them face to face with a revelation that they must make known. We would be remiss if we did not ask ourselves, this evening, about the ways in which we, too, are open to God's word? Are we attentive when the scriptures are read and proclaimed during worship? Do we show a willingness to hear the message that God intends for us? True attentiveness to God's word involves a "poverty of spirit" and a humble and receptive heart.

It certainly doesn't take much for the shepherds to abandon their sheep and to follow-up on the preposterous message of the angels. One wonders what it would take for us to do the same? The shepherds are given the extraordinary gift of being able to see the infant for themselves even though the ensuing scene does have the makings of a farce. We discover an exhausted, unkempt woman wrapping a babe in swaddling clothes. Her anxious husband looking ill-at-ease. A stable full of creatures, clucking, mooing and braying indignantly around a manger. A field's worth of shepherds and assorted undesirables kneeling in adoration as the silent stars go by. Only the powers of this world are unknowingly absent. Had they been invited, they would have assuredly laughed at such a carnival of nobodies, that is, until they realized that the joke was ultimately be on them. With the shepherds' visit to the manger complete, Luke tells us that, in due course, they return, glorifying and praising God. "To whom or to what do they return?" we wonder, To their sheep? To their former way of life? We really don't know. The one thing that we do know is that they return changed. They are no longer who they once were. Their encounter with the Christ-child enables them to lift up their hearts in glory and praise of their God.

We, too, are changed by our encounters with this Savior who is born to us. That said, the change, the conversion that Christ works in our lives is not an automatic occurrence, but a gradual process which requires something of that same poverty of spirit of which we spoke earlier. We live into our identity as Christians when we are able to recognize and respond to God as he draws near to us. Unlike the shepherds who had angels appear to them, our encounters with God are typically much more modest but no less real. We encounter our Lord in those who are sick and in those who are suffering to whom we extend our healing hands, in the young child who needs our guidance and love,

in the beleaguered parent who needs an encouraging word, in those who are lonely and simply need a friend. The presence of Christ we encounter in other people changes us, too. The great spiritual writer, Thomas Merton, in his journal, entitled *A Search for Solitude*, reminds us that it is “the duty of the Christian to see Christ being born into the whole world and to bring him to life in all mankind.” Unfortunately, he adds, most of us “have sought to bring to birth in the world an image of ourselves and of our own society and we have killed the innocents in doing so.” Therefore, we leave Christ only one option: to flee from us into Egypt. Merton’s statement may seem a little harsh and even foreboding, but his words remind us, as do those of the prophet Isaiah, that the birth of Christ is not about pleasant sentiment, but about the brightness of God breaking into the violence and despair, into the gloom and darkness which surrounds us. While darkness is present in our world and shall remain so, there is now a chance, No, a promise that the kingdom of light will prevail. It is now up to “those among whom God favors” to join the choirs of angels and sing Glory to God, not just in words but in bold actions that breath of new life, of nonviolence, of God’s purposes for his creation. We are to engage in actions which speak of the kingdom and pay homage to Him who is the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince Peace, the light of the world in whom we shall find no darkness at all.