

Christmas Eve/Day Yr C, 24-25/12/2012
Lk 2:1-20
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"The God of surprises"

Perhaps you have heard this joke about a comedian and his wife. The comedian asks his wife what she wants for Christmas. She replies: "Oh, just surprise me." So, at three o'clock on Christmas morning the comedian rolls over in bed facing his wife and in a voice loud enough to wake her up cries out: "Boo!" She was so surprised and offended by her husband's act that she didn't speak to him all year, until the following Christmas.

While it's only a joke, there are a couple of things that it reminds me of in relation to the Christmas story according to Luke's Gospel. In Luke's account of Christ's birth, the element of surprise is quite prominent. Mary and Joseph were likely surprised to find that there was no place for them when they arrived in Bethlehem. They had to go to a barn where Mary gave birth to Jesus. The shepherds were certainly surprised when they saw an angel of the Lord. They were also surprised at the message the angel gave them of Jesus' birth. Moreover, the shepherds were likely surprised by the multitude of heavenly host as they sang their beautiful song of praise. Then, as the shepherds made their way to visit Jesus, they told of what had been told them, and everyone was amazed, surprised at such a message coming from shepherds.

The God of surprises was full of surprises when Jesus was born. Think of them all. Instead of a clear separation between the supernatural and the natural; the supernatural God comes to earth in the natural flesh and blood and bones of the human being Jesus.

Most kings and queens were likely born in posh palaces. Jesus was born in the most surprising, unexpected place, a barn. Moreover, the Saviour, Messiah and Lord is born in a small, backwater town like Bethlehem. Most

royalty are born in large, world renowned cities such as Jerusalem. The majority of royal family babies were likely dressed in expensive clothing, the most prestigious brand name attire available. Mary wrapped Jesus in bands of cloth. Most royal babies likely had the top-of-the-line beds to sleep in. Jesus slept in a manger.

The God of surprises surprised everyone, and continues to do so by showing his greatness in humility; and his power in weakness. He chooses the lowest and poorest of people, the shepherds instead of the highest and wealthiest of society to be the first human beings to see the world's Saviour, Messiah and Lord.

The message of Christmas according to Luke's account is that God truly loves and values the least, the lost and the last; those who are all-too-often forgotten and overlooked; the underdogs; the marginalised of society. Shepherds certainly fit that bill. They were looked down on by the so-called "orthodox" religious folks of that day. By spending most of their time in the fields and pastures tending to their flocks; they seldom made it into town or the holy city of Jerusalem to the temple to fulfill all of their religious obligations.

Moreover, by today's standards; if you like to bath or shower every day; you probably wouldn't want to get too close to the shepherds because they rarely bathed or washed their robes. If you take pride in your academic achievements; you would have little to converse with the shepherds about; since most of them were likely illiterate. Yet, as the apostle Paul so eloquently put it: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God." (1 Cor 1:27-29) So according to the God of surprises, the shepherds were God's chosen messengers of the good news of Jesus' birth.

By choosing the humble shepherds as the first messengers and visitors of Jesus; the God of surprises was also teaching us all about the truth of the

Incarnation. The message of God becoming Incarnate; of taking on flesh, blood and bones like us is that this “humiliation” of God is actually the wisest and strongest way of God acting in the world. Down through the centuries there have been many illustrations of what the God of surprises was up to when he sent Jesus his Son into the world as one of us. The good news message of the Incarnation is that God’s love is revealed in the clearest of ways by becoming human in Jesus.

Who do we trust the most? Who loves us the most? Who is our best friend? Oftentimes it is the one with whom we identify because they are like us. For example, it is the person who has been addicted to alcohol and hasn’t taken a drink for many years who is most likely to be able to reach out to other alcoholics and walk with them. Other alcoholics will come to trust, love and befriend such a person—since they have “been there and done that too.”

In other words the God of surprises; the Incarnate Jesus; is the God with us; our Emmanuel. A beautiful story, told some years ago, that demonstrates this in a heart-warming way is that of Dr. John Rosen, a psychiatrist in New York City, well known for his work with catatonic schizophrenics. Normally doctors remain separate and aloof from their patients. Dr. Rosen moves into the ward with them. He places his bed among their beds. He lives the life they must live. Day to day, he shares it. He loves them. If they don’t talk, he doesn’t talk either. It is as if he understands what is happening. His being there, being with them communicates something that they haven’t experienced in years—somebody understands. But then he does something else. He puts his arms around them and hugs them. He holds these unattractive, unlovable, sometimes incontinent persons, and loves them back into life. Often, the first words they speak are simply “thank you.”

It’s obvious that this is what God did for us through Jesus at Christmas. He moved into the ward with us. He placed His bed among our beds. Those who were there, those who saw Him, touched Him and were in turn touched by Him and restored to life. The first word they had to say was “thank you.”

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen....¹

Shifting gears now and going back to the joke at the beginning of the sermon; there is one other thing that the joke reminds me of in relation to Luke's Christmas story—namely, that just as the comedian's wife was offended by the "so-called gift" of her husband and she refused to speak to him until the next Christmas, so there were all kinds of folks in Bethlehem that refused to offer Mary and Joseph a place to stay. Did they even speak to Mary and Joseph? Did they hear what must have been a plea for help in their time of need? As the contractions started who was there to offer a safe and warm place for Mary to give birth to Jesus? Luke says nothing about the citizens of Bethlehem, other than that short and saddest of phrases in verse seven: "...there was no place for them in the inn." That's all we learn of the matter.

There was no place. Those words "no place" would prove to be true for Jesus as he grew into an adult and began his public ministry. He himself once said: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matt 8:20) Ultimately humankind, like the comedian's wife, was offended by Jesus; offended enough to reject and crucify him. So this Christmas the lingering question for us all is: Is there room; is there a place in our life for Jesus to live in, with and through us? Does he make any difference in terms of who you are and how you live your life? Are you more loving, forgiving, kind, joyful, and peaceful because of him? I hope you are; I truly hope so. Amen.

¹ *Sermon Illustrations For The Gospel Lessons* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1980, 1981, 1982), p. 69.