

Advent 05 – Christmas Eve – The Shepherd's Wonder

12/24/2024

Scripture 1: (Lk. 2:8-20 ESV)

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Sermon:

Every winter holiday season I cannot help but shudder and cringe whenever I hear Andy Williams sing, “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year” because, although I do appreciate the sentiment, it is completely misplaced.

The first Christmas was an event filled with wonder and it was awe inspiring, therefore it stands to reason that our celebration and remembrance {memorial} of the Savior’s birth should also be a wonderful occasion. However, the wonder that Andy sings about and what our commercial culture promotes as “seasonal wonder” have **nothing** to do with the true wonder of Christmas.

Christmas is **not** wonderful because of “jingle bell-ing”, or friends visiting, or parties and marshmallows, or ghost stories and memories of the past, or even “mistletoe-ing” {I have never really understood how that is even supposed to work as a verb}. Even if those elements might help us to make the winter season feel special, they do **not** make Christmas wonderful. They are unrelated and entirely unnecessary {none of them would have been present in 1st Century Judea upon the birth of Christ}.

Christmas is wonderful because the most unique and extraordinary event took place two thousand-ish years ago: the Incarnation of God the Son, the birth of Jesus Christ; when the Creator entered into His creation, into space and time, taking on human flesh and dwelling among His chosen people.

- That fact is why, above all else, Christmas is so wonderful.
- That fact is also why, above all else, the world is constantly trying to obscure the truth; to trivialize and distract us from the true enormity and wonder of the Incarnation.
- That fact is what we risk losing and forgetting beneath all of the glitz and glamour; beneath the false sense of wonder which evangelizes the false gospel of commercialism to us, seeking to feed our selfish greed, and to foster dissatisfaction with all of our many blessings.
- Yet, that fact is precisely what we recover, protect, and preserve whenever we delve into the Scriptures while maintaining the highest view of Who God is: the Omnipotent and Sovereign King over all; and the proper view of who we truly are: sinners in need of salvation, sinners in need of God’s mercy and grace, sinners who need Jesus Christ.
 - The wonder of Christmas happens when we encounter Jesus Christ and we discover what He has done for us by grace and in love.

Following the original act of creation itself, the Incarnation of God the Son is the most wondrous event in history and it will remain so until His Return and Glorious Appearing on the Day of the LORD.

So, to help us preserve a proper perspective of God and ourselves, and to avoid considering the extraordinary as simply ordinary, we remember that in the Incarnation:

- The Infinite entered the finite.
- The Majesty on High lowered Himself.
- The Strong chose to become weak.
- The Full emptied Himself.
- The Rightful forswore His rights. And,

- The Richest became the poorest.

Holding this perspective, we envision the greatest extreme willingly choosing to reduce itself to the least and extreme. Keeping our frame of reference in that perspective, we begin to be able to understand the wonder felt and experienced by everyone involved in the Christmas story, but especially the shepherds.

On the night of Christmas, somewhere outside the little town of Bethlehem, “...*there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.*”. These folks were simply doing their job, just as they did every night. It was routine. It was “business as usual” and nothing strange or unusual was expected. But then their whole night, and their lives, were changed in an instant. The ordinary was replaced by the extraordinary as “...*an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.*”. A cloud of brilliant light appeared in their midst; a holy cloud that inspired terror and reverence; a wondrous sight which had not been seen in Israel since the days of Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 8:10-11). They had never experienced this before, nor was it something that they had ever expected to experience.

“*And the angel said to them, "Fear not (Don't be scared!), for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."*”.

They pronounced something absolutely wondrous: the birth of the Savior, the LORD; but, just as wondrous was who made the pronouncement to whom:

- Angels proclaimed a divine message to shepherds.

Angels: ministering spirits (Hebrews 1:14), the LORD's heavenly servants (Psalm 103:20), beings who work and worship in God's presence; divine messengers sent from the King of the Universe; announced the birth of Christ to shepherds in Israel's fields rather than to the spiritual and political “shepherds of Israel” (Jeremiah 23:2; Ezekiel 34:2): the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, priests, and the Levites; because those were the shepherds who had **collectively** led God's people astray from His appointed and righteous paths. Now shepherds were not actually the “lowest of the low” on the 1st Century social ladder, as some commentators have suggested {they were incredibly important for the sacrificial system, for textile, and for food production}, but they also were not socially equivalent (on the human scale) with the angels. The disparity in their relative “social status” adds another layer of wonder to this encounter because messengers, ambassadors, or representatives from a king usually only met with representatives of the king to whom they were sent, or with the king himself; not common people.

- The LORD sending His angels to the shepherds is an example of God elevating the humble and humbling the proud.

Then, “...*suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*”. As wondrous as the news about Jesus was, as wondrous as who was telling whom about Him is, what Luke next describes fits our usual, ordinary definition and understanding of something “wonderful”.

I want you to imagine the clearest night sky that you can remember: imagine all the stars twinkling and the moon shining bright. Now, imagine that all of the ambient electric light is removed along with all the industrial, atmospheric pollution. What you should now be envisioning is the wonder and refulgent glory of the heavens that “*declare the glory of God*” and “[proclaim] *his handiwork*” (Ps. 19:1 ESV).

- It is nigh impossible for someone to look at the night sky and not feel awe and wonder.
- It is nigh impossible to not feel incredibly small and unimportant compared to the One who created the Universe.

Next, add the shining cloud of God's glory with a whole host of angels singing the LORD's praises to your mental vision

- How much **more wonderful** is the image in your mind now?
- How much **more wonderful** must the true reality have been?

But, even as wonderful as that glorious brilliance must have been, it surely was not the greatest wonder. That wonder was their response.

“When the angels went away from them into heaven...” the shepherds believed the angels word and *“...went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.”* These shepherds, a host of strangers to Mary and Joseph, came and inserted themselves into what was already an overwhelmingly stressful night.

- They came and found the sign which the angel had told them to look for.
- They came and brought tidings of great joy.
- They came and brought the angel's word of prophecy concerning who this baby was.
- They came *“And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.”*
- They came and *“Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.”*; because of her own experiences with Gabriel, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and baby John, Mary received and believed the shepherd's word; treasuring it.

The shepherd's sought and found the newborn Savior and they wondered at the greatest, most impossible miracle which was right before their eyes:

- the LORD; the Omnipotent, Sovereign, Creator of the Universe, was laying right before them; God in flesh, a child as humble, lowly, and poor as a person could be;
- the LORD; God in flesh; was a happy and healthy baby boy wrapped in swaddling clothes for warmth, just like any other newborn child would be;
- the LORD; God in flesh; was resting in an animal's feeding trough in a stable rather than in a bed, in a home, something which they might have been able to provide for their own firstborn sons.

When we think about this story, using the perspective of extremes that we began with, “What could be more wonderful and awe-inspiring than this: the Incarnation; God made flesh?”

Then finally, the shepherds returned to their field and their ordinary lives, but they did so *“...glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”* because of their most wondrous encounter with the divine.

I cannot imagine that they returned to their lives unchanged, because no one can, and that is the true miracle of Christmas; the miracle of the Incarnation; the miraculous transformation which every encounter with the living God, with Jesus Christ, provokes within us either bringing our hearts to life or hardening them.

Every life that Jesus touched then, and every life that Jesus touches today changes because “...*though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” (Phil. 2:6-11 ESV).

When we encounter Jesus, we are first confronted by the amazing wonder of the Incarnation: that the infinite God who is Spirit took on flesh and entered the finite; but then that gives way to an even more glorious wonder: that He did it, that He was born, in order to live and die for us as our perfect substitute.

- He did this so that our sins would be forgiven, washed away in the sacrifice of His blood.
- He did this so that we would become justified before the Father, clothed in His righteousness.
- He did this so that we would be united into Him as His brothers and sisters by sovereign and divine adoption.
- He did this because God loves us and gave His Son, Jesus, to us and for us.

Therefore, every life and heart that encounters Jesus is either: lightened in joy and peace through faith and hope by accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord, or hardened by their rejection of the truth and their willful disobedience of sin. Their response to Him determines their benefit: the Elect have faith while the rest reject Him. Truly, it is the wonder of God's grace that He saves any of us at all.

So, once you see the wonder of the LORD through the Incarnation; once you know how Wonderful the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and enthronement of Christ is for you, then you will be transformed and you will give God the glory. This is my sincere Christmas hope and wish that you shall do so with the Joy and Peace of Jesus Christ in your heart.

Once you see and know this, then you will know the real reason why this is “the Most Wonderful Time of the Year!”

AMEN