

New Hope Sermon Christmas Eve who Gets to see God's Glory?

Introduction

Despite our familiarity with this Christmas story, things are not always what they seem.

"A driver was pulled over for speeding by a police officer. As the officer was writing the ticket, she noticed several swords in the car.

"What are those for?" she asked.

"I'm a juggler," the man replied. "I use those in my act."

"Well, show me," the officer requested.

So he got out the swords and started juggling them: first three, then more, finally seven at one time, overhand, underhand, behind the back, putting on a dazzling show and amazing the officer.

As another car passed by, the driver did a double take looking at the cop and the juggler, and said, "My! That's one tough sobriety test!" *Received from Pastor Tim.*

Things are not always what they seem☺

Our Luke 2 account with the shepherds and the angels has been "demythologized" by critics and much of the supernatural has been explained away. But it needs to be taken at face value for its full impact to register in our hearts – even in the midst of a doubting, secular world.

We opened the service with The First Noel, a Christmas carol that celebrates this story. But we need to put all the carols and our familiarity with them into the context of secular people who hear them and dismiss them. I just read a fascinating article about that entitled: "Are the Christmas carols too frothy?" Here's one response:

"For many today Christmas carols are too frothy – not relevant in our world of terrorism, cancer cells and concentration camps. They think the tranquil lyrics of our Christmas songs couldn't encompass such terror. I think he has a point ... But remember, the first Christmas carol, after all, was a war hymn. Mary of Nazareth sings of God's defeat of his enemies, about how in Christ ... he "has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate" (Luke 1:52). There are some villains in mind there. Simeon's song, likewise, speaks of the "fall and rising of many in Israel" and of a sword that would pierce the heart of Mary herself. Even the "light of the Gentiles" he speaks about is in the context of warfare ... [God's] light overcomes the darkness (John 1:5), and frees us from the grip of the devil (2 Cor. 4).

Our corporate worship [often] ignores this spiritual warfare ... In a time when we seem to learn of a new tragedy each day, the unbearable lightness of Christmas seems absurd to the watching world. But, even in the best of times, we all know that we live in a groaning universe, a world of divorce courts and cancer cells and concentration camps. Just as we sing with joy about the coming of the Promised One, we ought also to sing with groaning that he is not back yet ([Rom. 8:23](#)), sometimes with groanings too deep for lyrics." Preaching Today.com

Russell Moore

Jesus's coming was not only to defeat the evil in the world but we need to remember that amidst all the celebration, he was born into extreme poverty in an remote village in an obscure part of Israel to a single mother and her husband – in a cattle shed. There's nothing romanticized or frothy about this story if we allow its truths to penetrate us. Paul writes "*Though he was rich (in heaven with the power and glory of the Godhead) yet for our sakes he became poor that we through his poverty might become rich.*" (2 Cor. 9:7) I've been thinking of that angle to the Christmas story this week. The depth of Jesus's poverty IS something that relates to the need of billions of people today. He did not come down as a far-away God in the pomp and circumstance of a glorified king. He came down, indeed, in a scandalous context (an unmarried virgin who conceived) and tasted suffering, persecution and death for everyone. His story is not a frothy add-on, of the feel-good Disneyland or Hallmark movie variety. God could have worked out the birth in any number of more ordinary or special circumstances; He could have given Mary and Joseph a better venue from which to introduce their Messiah Son into the world. But God didn't do that. As Bishop Desmond Tutu of Africa says,

“Only God knows our human condition from the inside. He did not shout good advice from a safe distance. He was embroiled in the muck, in the suffering, in the confusion and misunderstanding. He was a baby. He was born. He lived. He died. And He rose again. (International Christian Digest, quoted in *Christmas Treasures*, ed. Rubel Shelly).

Therefore, it is noteworthy that the first people who got to taste the supernatural and glory of God in the midst of their poverty and oppression were poor shepherds who tended the sheep on a hillside – sheep most likely raised for slaughter in the temple in Jerusalem. The symbolism is very significant since Jesus came as the Lamb of God, himself to be sacrificed. But God’s glory appeared to poor shepherds. Likely uneducated and demeaned by people in authority – they had no significant status in society. Yet they became the first to testify to others. The kings came a year or so later.

So how did God encounter those shepherds? As we think about it together, let’s pray.

Prayer

The Story:

Now listen to the story. Luke 2:8-20: *“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,

18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”

These humble shepherds were just doing their job. It was another cold, humdrum night, assumedly, until the angel appeared – surrounded by God’s glory. I expect the sky suddenly turned from night to day as the glory shone around them. Can you close your eyes and picture the scene? Talk about awesome. But naturally that glory terrified the shepherds. So the angel’s first words were *Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people.*” Do not be afraid. So often when God brings us revelation and we encounter Him in a deep way, and get a glimpse of His glory, it does cause us fear – we realize are in the presence of God.

But the angel told the shepherds that the long-awaited Jewish *Messiah, the Lord, the Savior of all people had just been born in Bethlehem that night.* Then the one angel was *joined by a vast host of others – the armies of heaven praising God (v.13).* What a sight it must have been and how amazing to hear the choir of them all proclaiming: *Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to all whom God favors.*” This is the only supernatural fanfare that God gave at the birth of His Son. All the armies of heaven came to earth to announce Christ’s birth. But not to kings and rulers and the proud and mighty. Just to shepherds tending their flocks on a hillside outside Bethlehem. This is not a frothy story. This has the mark of stark reality to it. The other supernatural sings were of course the virgin birth itself, the appearances of the angel Gabriel to both Mary and Joseph and the unusual star

that appeared in the heavens and attracted the wise men to come find Israel's new king. But the fanfare was reserved for the shepherds.

And the shepherds obviously recognized that. Together they had together encountered the glory of God and the message of God, so together they "ran to the village" to see "*this wonderful thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about.*" Luke 2:15-16. And the angel's words were proven right – they found Mary and Joseph and the baby – just as they had been told. And they then "*told everyone what had happened and what the angel had told them about this child.*" V.17.

There are several beautiful works of art depicted on Christmas cards today with the shepherds in that cattle shed. I think they are not too frothy. I expect the shepherds did kneel down or gaze in astonishment at the baby in that cattle crib. After all, the angels had just announced the glory of this new baby as the Savior of the world. So, in that spirit of wonder I want us to sing two simple carols that depict that scene: *What Can I Give Him? And Little Drummer Boy*. Both capture the simplicity of worship that should be all of our response to Jesus' birth.

Sing: *What Can I Give Him? And Little Drummer Boy*.

But there's one more application I want us to take away tonight. It's about the character of God who chose the most lowly people (in society's eyes) to tell the amazing stories of the gospel – first the shepherds with Christ' birth and then Mary Magdalene who was the first to see Jesus after He arose and thus the first witness to Christ's resurrection. Mary, the one who had been possessed by demons, a woman, not one of the apostolic band of men who followed Jesus.

To me these messengers further authenticate the Christmas message and the global purposes of the God who came to live among us and redeem us as our Savior. He came to the poor; He became poor. We now, though made rich in Him, we are to play it forward and tell others about our amazing Savior.

That's our role as Christ's messengers. The job is not given to the high and mighty, but to those to whom God had revealed Himself – to all of us who have received Him in our lives and know His voice. We are the ones to "go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere that Jesus Christ is born."

Let us pray.

Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson 12/24/17

Sing carol - Go tell it on the mountain