

Characters at the Crèche: With a Song in Their Hearts

Luke 2:1-20

Third Sunday in Advent/16th December 2007

So what sent the shepherds back to the fields “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen”? Heavenly heralds *sing* the good news that compels the shepherds to Bethlehem. I like to imagine the shepherds singing hymns of praise to Yahweh as they return. It’s easy to imagine them being very musically gifted. David was a shepherd, a musician, and a composer. We can imagine him sitting under the stars of the night and singing psalms to Yahweh. It is the city of David, this city of the Shepherd-King, which welcomes the birth of the Messiah, according to Luke. The heavenly herald *sings* that a Savior, the bringer of peace has been born in Bethlehem and, of all places, a manger.

So why were these singing shepherds so full of joy? What exactly is this good news? Why them? Of course the message is certainly worthy of anyone’s worship and praise. The promised Savior is born. Peace on earth. That’s good news. But it’s especially good news for *Luke’s* congregation because the only person who had the title *Savior* when Jesus was born was one person: *Caesar Augustus* (64 BC – 14 AD). And there was only one person in the Roman Empire who was known as the bringer of peace to the world: *Caesar Augustus*.¹ So that the declaration of a new Savior born in the reign of Caesar Augustus means that for Luke’s community, Jesus’ birth is different. This is how *God’s* Savior enters the world and redeems the world with peace. Not through brute force and violent power. The Roman Peace (the *Pax Romana*) was secured by the point of the spear.² The *God’s* Savior comes humbly; he’s vulnerable, fragile. Not at the center of power and influence, but on the edge of it, out in the fields, in the middle of no place. Not with fanfares and triumphant marches as the Romans liked to do, but almost unnoticed – except for a few smelly, extremely poor, rough, hard-skinned, illiterate, simple people otherwise known as shepherds, who are

¹ The famous Priene inscription, for example, found on the lintel of a temple in Turkey states, “THE AUTOCRAT CAESAR, THE SON OF GOD, THE GOD SEBASTOS,” meaning to be worshipped. In 9 BC, the League of Asian Cities wrote a declaration thanking providence for “the most perfect good in Augustus, whom she filled with virtues for the benefit of mankind, bestowing him upon us and our descendants as a savior– he who put an end to war and will order peace, Caesar, who by his epiphany exceeded the hopes of those who prophesied good tidings....” Cited in Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Birth* (HarperOne, 2007), 160.

² In 9 BC, the magnificent Altar of Peace (*Ara Pacis Augustae*) was dedicated in Rome’s Campus Martius (Fields of Mars) to commemorate the *Pax Romana* and still stands in Rome today.

summoned to go to Bethlehem and see for themselves, as Calvin (1509-1564) put it, the Savior of the world, “wrapped in rags.”³

Why did they return glorifying God? In a Christmas sermon, Calvin observes, speaking of the shepherds, “Here, then, was a scandal which could make these poor people *lose* courage.”⁴ If you think about it, he’s right. The shepherds were part of the peasant class and under the Roman occupation would have been severely oppressed and exploited by Rome and the likes of Herod.⁵ If you were hoping for a change in the social order, if you were hoping for the overturning of the people in charge, if you were hoping for a new and better world, waiting for deliverance from the Roman occupation, it’s easy to imagine that when they approached the manger they would have been both scandalized and thoroughly disappointed. But they weren’t.

What caused their hearts to sing? Maybe because it suddenly dawned on them that God was doing the unexpected when they realized that *they* were the first to hear the good news; and because this Savior was born for the likes of them – people without status, the socially and economically marginalized. Only Luke tells us about the shepherds. But it’s not surprising when we see throughout his gospel that Jesus was born for the poor and powerless, for the despised and the oppressed, the worn down and worn out. Jesus was born for them – and everyone today like them.

The point is reinforced by the angels’ greeting of “peace of among those whom he favors.” Scholars have recently seen this as a Hebraic term meaning “sons or man of God’s good will.” It doesn’t have to do with those who are nice and kind or a general call to be nice and kind because it’s Christmas. It’s a phrase that was actually used by the Essene community in Qumran, a Jewish sect that was waiting for the coming Messiah in the wilderness at the time of Jesus. We know this through the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered only fifty years ago. These scrolls are invaluable in our understanding of the New Testament and Judaism. A leading Dead Sea Scroll scholar, Geza Vermes writes in a recent book, *The Nativity: History and Legend*, that for the Essenes, “Peace on earth is proclaimed only to God’s elect.”⁶ Now when we hear the term elect, don’t think the Essenes were early Presbyterian. This has nothing to do with predestination. But it does refer to the elect as the chosen, the blessed, and the

³ Cited in John D. Witvliet and David Vroegge, ed. *Proclaiming the Christmas Gospel: Ancient Sermons and Hymns for Contemporary Christian Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 126.

⁴ Witvliet and Vroegge, 124. Emphasis added.

⁵ Borg & Crossan, 192.

⁶ Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: History and Legend* (Doubleday, 2006), 92.

righteous of God, the *object* of God's good news. And the *object* of this declaration, the elect are people far on the edges in the ancient world, the poor, and the marginalized.

The shepherds hear first because they're the most receptive. Maybe the marginalized always hear and experience God's grace first because they know their poverty and their need, they know the deep hunger of the human heart often obscured by power and wealth, comfort and shopping. The shepherds are the first to hear about *God's* Savior because they're the ones who have been waiting the longest, they need to hear it, they need hope, they are the ones for whom Christ was born. That's a reason to sing for joy, glorifying and praising God as they returned to the field, returned to the fields to work.

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