

2011 Family Christmas Eve Service

The congregation was asked to choose one of four sermons. They chose the Shepherds. All four are offered here...

Mary

You have chosen Mary, a popular choice and an interesting one. Do you realize how radical this story is? Probably not! It is. There has been lots of press of late about abuse of women and honour killings and here is Luke presenting a young woman as God's instrument of change in a male dominated patriarchal society. This is a very subversive story.

It is a strange feeling to be pregnant, especially with your first-born. There is a mixture of delight and fear, anticipation and trepidation. I wanted my mother and my sisters close by to assist or give assurance. Oh, Joseph did his best but you know what men are like around babies. He did fetch the Innkeeper's wife and she was no stranger to birthing babies. But Bethlehem, and a stable, can you believe it? The Romans had ordered a census and we had to travel to Bethlehem. Joseph had borrowed a donkey from his cousin but the journey was long and I was exhausted.

But don't let me get bogged down in details. I had dreamt of this child since those first faint stirrings in my womb. Every woman does. How do you describe it, the knowing that something, no, someone is growing inside of you, some little life totally dependent upon you and yet totally different and independent from you, something virginal, a gift from God. From the first little kick I could think of nothing else. I so much wanted to be at home with my mother and sisters close by but when he was born, when he was busily sucking at my breast and I had counted all ten little fingers and ten little toes and gazed into that little face that had been growing inside of me, well, I forgot about the stable and the hay and my disappointment. I was just glad that he was alive and well, my first born, my precious child. It was not an easy time to bring a child into the world, perhaps no time is. Our country was occupied. Roman law was hard and arbitrary. Many a mother had lost her child to a Roman sword. But none of that bothered me that night.

We called him Joshua ben Joseph, that's Jesus in Greek, Joshua, one who would lead his people out of the wilderness, one who would help them cross over to God's promised land. I suppose every mother has such dreams for her children. Then the shepherds came with tales of angels and great rejoicing. Oh, there is so much that I could tell you but on this night, the anniversary of the night that he was born, I was just thankful he was alive and well.

Joseph

The Scriptures tell us little about Joseph. Matthew tells that he was engaged to Mary, that he belonged to the tribe of David. Luke tells us that they lived in Nazareth and had to travel to Bethlehem, the city of David, to register for the Roman census but the scriptures tell us little.

It is a wonderful thing to experience a birth, especially the birth of your own child. Mary was so brave, perhaps all women are but me, I was scared stiff. Thank God for the Innkeeper's wife. I would have been lost without her. Maybe the child would have been lost too. It had been a hard trip, especially for Mary, and I was sad and mad that the only place that we could find was this stable but when our son was born all that passed away, all our exhaustion, all our disappointment, all our fears and apprehensions. I was never really comfortable with babies. I suppose a lot of men are like that but when the Innkeeper's wife handed him to me and I held my own child in my own arms something in me turned over. I sat down on a barrel and stared into his little face. I thought I knew love but this was different, this was a new dimension I did not know. I was shivery all over but not cold. I was, oh so proud, and yet profoundly humbled. I was a father and I held the reality of it in my arms. A son, a son, how do I begin to tell you how I felt? My heart overflowed. I am not a demonstrative man but I was giddy with joy and love for this little bundle of delight. My son! I would have bought a drink even for the hated Romans. Oh, my son, my son, my son, I will cherish you all the days of my life.

Legend has it that he did, that Joseph, like many fathers, cherished this gift from God and shared with his son the skills of his trade, the wisdom of his life, the gift of his faith and the unconditional love of his God. What greater gift can a parent give than this? Would that every father were so kind, so loving, so present. We know it is not so and so on this night, this very special night we pray for fathers and for sons, for parents and for children.

The Angels

Angels have a mixed history in the Bible. Sometimes they are God's messengers and sometimes they are free agents. Paul mentions them but not with much enthusiasm. Luke, on the other hand, uses them a lot as announcers and protectors.

Most of our ideas of angels come from medieval paintings or 17th century John Milton's poems **Paradise Lost** and **Paradise Regained**. Matthew and Luke use them as God's messengers, as instruments of God's grace. Modern psychologists talk of feelings that are expressed as "angelic," healthy, while feelings that are suppressed are "demonic," unhealthy, leading to depression and despair.

Do you remember when Sidney Crosby scored the winning goal in overtime at the Vancouver Winter Olympics in 2010? Do you remember the collective cheer that went up all across Canada? And do you remember how the next day at work people were more friendly, more engaging, more "Canadian," as everyone talked about that game and that goal. It was like that the night that Jesus was born. For weeks we angels had been holding our breath. Oh we knew that it was going to happen, this birthing, this God becoming present to the people again, becoming Emmanuel, God with us. It's just that it had been so long, like the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Stanley Cup. The older angels still spoke of it but it was so long ago that most of us couldn't remember and some of us did not exist. So you can perhaps understand our excitement. This was a big event. This was good news on a big scale. This was right up there with David's victory over Goliath, or Daniel in the lion's den or Moses at the Red Sea, or old Sarah birthing Isaac without the aid of fertility clinics. This was breaking news, world headline stuff and all that but nobody seemed to be listening. Everybody was up to their eyeballs in this Roman census for the whole empire. I mean, what was that about, everybody having to travel to wherever they came from and get counted just because Caesar Augustus said so? Talk about chaos. I had not witnessed anything like this since Noah tried to get all those animals into the ark without them killing or eating each other. Only the shepherds seemed to be going nowhere. There they were, out on the hillside, keeping watch over their flocks when we arrived. If they thought they were in for a quiet night think again. By the time we had delivered our news well, they couldn't contain themselves. They high-tailed it into town to see this thing like they had just won the Jerusalem Lotto or the trifecta at the Roman chariot races. They just told everyone they met, not that too many were interested, but the shepherds didn't care. If God wanted to pick a cheering section he couldn't have done better. That's what Gabriel said and he should know.

The Shepherds

God, the bread was good and I was hungry. Even though it had fallen in the mud between when Zeke threw it the bread was good. And the mud was good too. So there I was, a muddy man with a mouthful of muddy bread. The sheep had settled down for the night, only the odd bleating of a young lamb searching for its mother's teat. And the stars, how could I forget the stars? Perhaps because it was so dark they seemed to shine more brightly. I remember reaching up to touch them they seemed so close. Then Zeke asked if I could hear the angels singing. At first I thought it was the sheep, then I thought he'd had too much wine to drink but when I listened closely there it was, something about "Glory to God," well, why not, then something about "peace on earth." Now there's a thought worth considering, peace on earth! Wouldn't we all love to live long enough to see that? I was lost in my thoughts about that when Zeke shook me and asked if I was coming with him. "Where are we going?" I asked. "To see the child, the Lamb of God," he said. "What child," I asked. "The one the angels sang of, are you coming or staying?" Well, I didn't really think about it, I just stumbled after him, across the muddy fields with muddy bread in my mouth. When we came to the village Zeke headed for the Inn. Now we're talking, I thought, but he passed the door and went around the back to the stable. There was a young couple there, a young couple with a new-born child. We just stood in the doorway and stared at them. They stared back at us. Then Zeke began to tell our story, the one about the angel's song, about us out there with the sheep and the stars and this song about peace on earth. They listened as Zeke stumbled his way through it, just taking it in as if it were the gospel truth. Then the young mother asked if we wanted to hold her child. "Not me." I muttered but Zeke stepped forward and took the little one, cradled it in the crook of his arm just as I had seen him do with motherless lambs, just held it close to his heart before handing it back. Zeke said the world had changed for the better with that birth. I don't know but I've never forgotten that night or that child or the look on that mother's face. Don't know if the world changed much but I guess I did. I never eat a crust of bread without thinking about it, about him. Funny how that is, you can never quite explain it but you know, somewhere deep down you just know. And the bread reminds me. That's how it is for me. How about you?

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