

I've been thinking about this whole Christmas narrative, there's a rightness about it. The whole account is right. The whole of it is marvelous, there's a rightness about it. Pascal in *The Pensees* has one curious quip, it's almost a joke. He has a lot of one liners, they are just so marvelous. He lived in the 17th century, physicist, mathematician and Christian and one of his thoughts is this. Let me read it to you. Pascal says, "A peasant or an artisan may speak about wealth but then what does he know about wealth? As a peasant. Or a lawyer may speak about war but what does he know about war," this may be a tough one to say here in Washington D.C. about lawyers. "Or he may speak about royalty but what does he know about royalty. But a rich man can speak rightly about wealth ..., and a king can speak indifferently about what it means to be a king,"⁵ and then comes the great one liner that ends his thought; "and God rightly speaks of God." God knows how to speak for himself and he does it just right. The shepherds are just right. This birth in the stable is just right because Jesus Christ is just right.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this just rightness, it never stops. Jesus knows how to make yokes that fit us well. He knows how to invite us all to come in when he says to us; "all ye who labor and are heavy laden, come, I'll give you rest." He knows how to conquer sin and death and the power of evil. He does it in a way that takes us totally by surprise and yet it's just right. Lord, may we experience that just rightness during this time of Christmas in our lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

1 Chesterton, G.K. *The Everlasting Man*. New York: Image Books, 1955.

2 Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959. Chapter 10

3 *Deus Caritas Est*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006. Page 4.

4 Rice, Anne. *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*. New York, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

5 Pascal, Blaise. *The Pensees*. Number 799.

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Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.

Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20016

www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800

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The National Presbyterian Church

A Carol in the Night

Luke 2:8-14

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

During this advent time we chose a quotation from G.K. Chesterton's book, *The Everlasting Man* from which we found our title for this series, "The Visited Planet." Chesterton in his book he has this to say: "Right in the middle of all these things stands up an enormous exception. It is quite unlike anything else. It is a thing final like the trumpet of doom though it is a piece of good news. News, that seems, too good to be true. It is nothing less than the loud assertion that this mysterious Maker of the World has visited his planet in person."¹

At the end of this great book, he says, "I have not minimized the scale of the miracle. ... As some of our milder theologians think it wise to do. Rather I have deliberately dwelled on that incredible interruption as a blow that broke the very backbone of history." And of course it did. We today describe history as B.C. and A.D. It broke the backbone of history, "I have great sympathy with those who are scandalized by this and are worried about it because they think it might shake the world." And here is Chesterton's last line. "But it did not shake the world. It has steadied the world." The birth of Christ steadied the world.

We have been considering the text from St. Luke, the second chapter; last week we saw the opening of that great text, "In those days the decree went out from Cesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled" and then Mary and Joseph go from Nazareth a 90 mile journey to Bethlehem to be enrolled. And when they arrive, it became the time came for her to be deliv-

ered. “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.” That was the text we looked at last week. Now, today, we move on to the next part of that text but let us pray first.

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Lord, be our teacher today as we look at this beloved text. May it speak in a new and fresh way to us today. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Chapter 2, St. Luke verse 8 will continue. “And in that 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 round about them and they were filled with fear.”

These shepherds have to keep track of their sheep. Sheep are really not an outstanding animal in terms of intelligence. Sheep will actually eat a plant right down into the root and destroy the plant. Cows won’t do that. Therefore sheep have to be moved all the time. They can’t be put in just one pasture and left there. So shepherders have to move around. And then they build small rockeries in the fields where they can watch at night. Sheep have to be always watched because they panic. And if they panic, they’ll scatter, and then you’ll lose them. So being a shepherder is not really a glorious profession. Most workers would say that it is at the low end of professions. And these shepherders are keeping watch over the flocks at night. And then an angel of the Lord, a messenger of the Lord, appears to these nightshift shepherds. They are not even probably the shepherds who own the sheep. They are the ones who work the nightshift. But they have this amazing experience. They see an angel, a messenger of the Lord. What Luke says is interesting. He uses the word “fear” twice. The Greek word *phobos* we get the word phobic from this. He uses the word phobia twice. “They were afraid...” and then he repeats it again, “mega-afraid.” He adds the word *mega* in Greek which means “very afraid.” We even use that word in modern English, “mega.” So they were afraid, mega afraid. They were very frightened. This was quite a shock to see this angel.

Now, let’s listen to what happens next. “And the Angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid for behold I bring you good news of great joy.’” It’s interest-

That’s very important, theologically, that this event is in history and is witnessed by people. That’s why Pontius Pilate finds his name in the Apostles’ Creed. He gets his name in the creed because Christ died under Pontius Pilate within human history. That’s why Caesar Augustus gets his name in Luke 2, in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus. That’s why Herod gets his name in the text we’ll look at next week in Matthew 2. Jesus was born in the days of Herod, the king, who is an historical figure. And the shepherds get their name in the text because they’re real people in a real place and they saw this event. This event did not happen in the skies. Jesus is not a phantom Jesus. It happened in history, in a real stable, in a real place and they share it with Mary and Joseph. And then comes that curious line, “and Mary pondered these things in her heart.” I finished reading Anne Rice’s book *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*.⁴ It’s a novel she wrote about Jesus as a young boy. And she’s become a Christian--actually in writing that novel, she became a Christian believer and now, she’s written a second novel, *Christ the Lord: Road to Cana*; I’m reading that now.

But it’s very touching, she has an interesting line, she says that Mary and Joseph had their early encounter with Gabriel--and Joseph had his own divine encounter in his dream. But since then they haven’t had anything really to go on and they’ve just been trusting by faith as they went from Nazareth down to Bethlehem and notice, nobody met them at Bethlehem. You’d think that God would certainly take care to make sure everything is all right. There would be a reservation for them at the inn or something. Nothing is there. And this young couple, at a very fragile time in their lives, are required to travel to Nazareth because of the Roman oppression and they go from Nazareth, 90 miles, to Bethlehem. Nobody is ready for them but then they find a stable and a birth occurs and Anne Rice makes the point that Mary must have been very blue. A woman has a tough time right after delivery for sure and just at that moment, the shepherds arrive with this carol, the first carol and they sing it and Anne Rice suggests in her novel that’s where Joseph and Mary then got confidence and hope “Ah, God has not forgotten us. He’s kept the promise.” And the shepherds bear that good news to Mary and Joseph. that’s how she interprets; “Mary pondered this in her heart.” She took the words of the shepherds and they comforted her, “I think that’s right. God knows what he’s doing. This great choir to sing for the shepherds, He knows what He’s doing.” And now, they share this song with Mary and Joseph.

They don't find a grand program. They find a person.

On Wednesday nights, at our Vespers service we've been reflecting on one great text from the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 9, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." This past Wednesday we shared on the second part of that great Isaiah 9, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." "For unto us, a child is born, a son is given." "And His name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor'." We looked at the fact that a child is born. That's what the prophet, Isaiah saw, a child will be born and that's exactly what the shepherds hear. This is the sign. You're going to see a child, a person. I cannot overemphasize the significance of this. The Christian faith is centered around a person, a person that we'll get to know, a person that we'll be able to pray to. You can't pray to an idea. You can't pray to a grand theme. You can pray to a person, a person who will know us, who will go to the cross, a person who will conquer death in our behalf and win that victory for us and that person is the heart of the Christian faith and the shepherds heard it and they were the first visitors to see it.

Let me read the opening lines of first encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI (a papal encyclical is known by the first three Latin words that appear in the encyclical) *Deus Caritas Est*, God is Love. Listen to what Pope Benedict says, "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea but the encounter with an event, a person which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." Saint John's Gospel describes that event in these words, "God so loved the world, he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should have eternal life." And that's what makes me a Christian. And then I love what Benedict further says, "In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence ..." and we've seen so many horrible things done under the name of religion right in these last years of our lives, he adds, "This message is both timely and significant. For this reason, I wish in my first encyclical to speak of the love of God which He lavishes upon us and which we, in turn, can share with others."³ And that's what the shepherds see. They see God's love as a person, this person, the child, Jesus Christ.

And then three, the shepherds tell the Holy Family what they saw. It's interesting. Luke makes this telling a major point. The shepherds go into the stable, see this baby, Joseph and Mary and they tell Joseph and Mary what they saw and what they heard. They become the first witnesses to the event.

ing in Luke's account in the Greek text the word "joy" is used with again the word "mega." If you're mega afraid, this is going to be mega joy, so that counteracts the mega fear. "Great joy, which shall come to all the people," not just to these shepherds, "for to you is born this day in the city of David," that's Bethlehem, "a savior who is Christ," that's the word Messiah, "the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And then after that announcement comes a song. "Suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the Heavenly Host."

It's interesting the word Luke uses for host there is the Greek word for "soldiers." Heavenly soldiers, troops, it's like the Marine Corps chorale. Heavenly soldiers, troops, and the King James Bible decided to translate it "host," it is the word for soldiers. "And there was suddenly with the angel a multitude of the heavenly troops praising God and saying"--and now comes the first Christmas carol. Our choir just sang it to us. All the great masters in music have put this song to music ever since. Here is the song. We don't know the melody that was used then but this is the song they sang, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good will toward men." By the way, the word in the text "good will" is an interesting word in the Greek language. It is the word *eudokia* that is used here. *Eu* in Greek means "good" and *dokia* means "decision", "good decision" or "good act." And the word is used several times in the New Testament. It is used in the Book of Matthew and in Luke with regard to our Lord at his baptism. The text says that God was well pleased with his Son, a good decision about his Son. And it was used by St. Paul in a very important text in the Book of Philippians.

Remember after the great Philippians' hymn in chapter 2 when Paul tells us that Jesus Christ who was equal with God emptied himself, took upon himself the form of a servant and identified with us even to death, even death at the cross. And then after that, "God therefore has highly exalted him and given him a name above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and heaven, on earth and under the earth." And after that song, Paul says these words. He says, "Now, as for you Philippians, the salvation of God is given you. Work it out." He used the word *erg*, "work," make your salvation an event. And then he follows it with this sentence. "For God is at work in you, both to will and to do his," and now comes this word, the

same word used by the angels, “His good decision.” God has made a good decision. Jesus Christ who died and conquered death on our behalf grants us salvation and now we’re to work out that salvation. We are to make an event of that salvation in our own lives. And then Paul ends it with this line. “For God is at work in you, both to will and to do his good decision, his *eudokia!*”

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men.” I would translate it this way: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, good will; this is the good decision of God toward you. Peace, the good decision of God toward you. Well, they heard that song and then they said to each other, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that’s happened which the Lord has made known to us. And they went with haste and they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child.” Probably they sang the carol, too. “And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.” And then this interesting line that Luke adds, “And Mary kept all these things in her heart, pondering them in her heart.” And then the shepherds returned, “glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen as have been told to them.” This is a beloved text. It should be. I want to make some reflections on that text today.

Notice the three things that happened that night that are important for the Holy Family and are also important for us today. Of first importance is what the shepherds heard spoken and sung to them; the angel first speaks to them an announcement and it’s followed up with this great choir and carol. What an amazing event. Have you ever thought of how luxurious this is? In economic hard times to have the whole Robert Shaw Chorale and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra sing for the nightshift shepherds. Who could afford that? God could. And he did it. These shepherds not only have an angel, that’s big enough, but they get this whole choir. And the choir sings this incredible song, which will be sung down to the ages over and over again, every great musician of all time, Bach and Beethoven and Mozart and Brahms will create their interpretations of this carol. “Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace; goodwill toward men” then the shepherds to hear the announcement, “Don’t be afraid. I bring you good news for to you is born this day in this city today the Savior, who is Christ the Lord,”

The shepherds heard spoken to them and sung to them the core of the

Christian good news. The angel says, “I bring you good news.” And that’s the word “Gospel,” which we’ve been using ever since. And notice that what they heard will not change. They don’t hear a message as preliminary to what later on great theologians will redefine and explain in more depth. No, they hear the whole message right now, it will never be changed. This is it. Savior, Lord. Jesus Christ is savior and Lord, and for all people, and He brings peace, and that’s the good decision that God has made. That’s the Gospel. And these shepherds heard it. They heard it. It’s clear, it’s simple, it’s direct. It’s not complicated.

Karl Barth in his *Dogmatics in Outline* when he comes to the great section on Jesus Christ he makes an interesting statement. “Tell me how it stands with your Christology and I’ll tell you who you are.”² And then after that he says, “For this is the very center of the Christian faith, this message.” And then he says, “In fact, I’m like a Sunday School teacher in front of my kiddies who has something to say that a mere four-year-old can understand.” Well, now, we know that four-year-olds are not mere. That’s the only mistake Barth is making there. But he says it, “A mere four-year-old can understand this. The world was lost, Christ is born, rejoice.” That’s the Gospel. And the shepherds heard it. What a moment.

Two, the shepherds also do something that’s vital to the whole significance of the Christian event. It’s interesting to me that the angel tells the shepherds, “This will be a sign for you. You will find the baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laying in a manger.” That’s the sign. The sign is that the shepherds, these nightshift shepherds, they will see the child. And by the way notice that it does not say, “And you will see the child in Room 407, a beautiful suite that’s been prepared for the child in the inn.” “Oh no, you will see the child in the stable.” Now we know why Jesus was born in a stable, because the shepherds need to come with their sheep. How can they go up through the elevator to suite 407? They can’t do it. Jesus Christ was born at the margins. He was born at the stable because God knew he was planning to invite shepherds to see it. Herod wasn’t invited. Shepherds were invited and so they go to the stable and that’s where they see this child and that visit is called a sign. This will be a sign. The word “sign” means something that points beyond itself as well as having meaning in itself. “You will find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” Their finding becomes a major part of the holy significance of Christmas because what they find is a person. They don’t find an idea. They don’t find a theme.