

*Transforming the Ordinary*

(From the Gospel of the Circumcision of Christ [Jan. 1<sup>st</sup>]: *Luke ii.15.*)

The Second Sunday after Christmas

*15 And it came to pass , as the angels were gone away from them into heaven , the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass , which the Lord hath made known unto us. 16 And they came with haste , and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. 17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. 18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary kept all these things , and pondered them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned , glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen , as it was told unto them. 21 And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child , his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*

Last Sunday, we considered the enormous contrast in emotions that the Christmas season invariably brings: the highest possible praise and celebration, as reflected in the Gospel passage describing the appearance from heaven of the angels to the shepherds, but also unspeakable suffering and pain, as seen in the tale of King Herod's terrible destruction of the Holy Innocents. This paradoxical contrast is invariably played out, we noted, in every succeeding Christmas, often reflected in our own personal narratives of this time of year. The arrival of this Baby seems to have shaken the very pillars of human experience with an impact that has never been diminished nor ceased.

Today I want to consider another paradox: the very *ordinariness* of the circumstances, at least as they would have appeared to any observer who views these events without the agency of faith. We will find great comfort, I believe, as we see that the means that the Mighty God uses for His highest purposes are very familiar to you and me. The people He engages for His ends are recruited from our own ranks. It was this way then, and it still is, now.

In the Circumcision Gospel, the angels have gone, and the shepherds are left only with the memory of their appearance. The darkness of the wintery Judaeian hillsides has returned. The bleating of the sheep, roused temporarily from sleep, is the only sound remaining, along with the whispering of the night winds. But a declaration from heaven has ignited faith in human hearts:

*-So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Romans 10:17)*

*-Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen . (Hebrews 11:1)*

It is *faith* that always transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary!

The shepherds rush off at once to look for the event that the angel of the Lord had announced:

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes , lying in a manger. (Luke 2:11-12)*

Please try to imagine with me the scene that greeted them. Consider it, as if you had never heard the Christmas story repeated on a thousand occasions this time of year. As if no carols had been

composed and sung, no great cantatas composed to commemorate the event, no solemn church services planned and executed throughout the world to honor it. What do they find? An awkward, uncomfortable situation, utterly incongruous with the grandeur of the angelic announcement. A little vignette that must be repeated many, many times in the history of the earth's poor: a journeying couple, caught by circumstance, without the money or position necessary to secure appropriate care, having to make do with the best they could find. They have travelled under the desperate compulsion of obedience to laws imposed arbitrarily by a distant, faceless government. There are no options or choices possible for them. A husband, his sweating face reflecting the anxiety of trying to improvise a comfortable shelter from the most unlikely and unpromising of materials for a beloved wife in the last stages of labor. It is the sort of pitiful, embarrassing kind of picture that polite and cultured eyes turn away from. It is the kind of misery that those who are secure and comfortable wish they had never seen. It impresses itself indelibly upon the memory. Surely for those who occupied the nearby inn that night, it is the very last sort of occurrence they would have hoped to witness. If there is entertainment going on within the inn's warm interior, its volume and pace are increased. No one could hear the cries of a new mother in her first labor.

Yes, it's just another ordinary day in the life of the destitute. So what's new...? But the shepherds are viewing the exact same scene with different eyes: *And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.* What do they see, or, should we say, *how* do they see it? The pathetic sight that greets them has been changed unaccountably from one of victimhood, of crisis and sorrow, to one of a victory that engulfs not only this couple, cradling their new Infant with relief and joy, but the whole city of Bethlehem, the entire nation of Israel, and all the world, past, present, and future! In the commonness and humility that confronts them, they recall again the words of the angel:

*Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.* (Luke 2:10b-11)

Faith has absolutely reversed the verdict that would have been pronounced on this situation. God Himself has done something here! He has taken the raw materials of this earth and wrought that which is beautiful and eternal. The fate of the entire world swings on the hinge that is this lowly stable in Bethlehem. Now I can better understand Mary's words in the *Magnificat*:

*For [God] hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden... He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.* (Luke 1:48a, 52, 53)

And I think of Paul's admonition to the Corinthian Christians:

*...the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the*

*world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.* (1 Cor. 1:25-29)

Leaving the happy couple to themselves, the shepherds depart. But this is no spectacle of stage or theater they have witnessed, with a closing curtain, a round of applause, and the words “The End” prominently displayed over the entirety. No...:

*And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child., And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.* (Luke 2:17, 20)

For all who were privileged to view these things through eyes of faith, what the whole world would have dismissed as inconsequential, unimportant, and so ordinary as to hardly be worth attention, has become, in fact, the only thing that matters.

Christmastime for the world is that singular moment when it allows itself to turn from its exhausting quest for novelty, to gaze with sentimental longing at an old, familiar scene which in its vulnerability and simplicity seems so very, very good somehow. Businessmen, factory workers, the high, the low, the rich, the poor, the happy, the sad, allow a few, so very few moments to reflect on something that should hardly be compelling --an ancient tale of a family in crisis. They hear the angels, but only faintly. After all, it's just the radio playing the same old carols. They see the glow in the stable, but surely there's nothing substantive in it. On December 26<sup>th</sup>, the lights will be turned off, the colors dimmed, the music stopped, and everything will return to the status quo. “After all,” they think, “we will never be advanced by such things. When it comes to the *real world*, what good will any of that do?”

But the example of Christmas should provide you and me an opportunity to take heart: God has a peculiar taste for common, everyday people, and regular, ordinary situations. When He prepares to paint His masterpiece, as an artist standing with colors in hand, He seems to overlook the loud, bright, showy tints that beg for attention and use, and dips His brush into the ordinary pastels which most of life actually consists of. We do not need to be anyone else other than who we are. Faith in God --believing His Word-- brings a holy light to the dimmest and darkest places. It turns tales of discouragement into epics of victory. It applies eternal meaning to seemingly meaningless experience. It makes saints out of sinners.

What did this mean for Mary, and Joseph, and the Infant Christ, and all the good people who surrounded them? Think of it, for we still sing the praises of that very simple, lowly occasion.

What does this mean for you, exactly where you are? And for me?

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*