

Luke 2 : 1-14 (15-20)  
Christmas, Proper 1

The famous theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once observed that the Christmas event can only be spoken about in poetry. He went on to comment that over the centuries preachers have analyzed it, sermonized about it and eventually tried to turned Christmas into dogma.

"Dogma," he said, "is rationally petrified poetry." I think I understand what he meant. He meant that you can't analyze Christmas. You can't dissect Christmas. Because Christmas, the event of Christmas, speaks not to the mind, but to the heart.

As I reread the Christmas story this year, images of Bethlehem and the shepherd's in the field flooded my mind. I kept seeing the darkened sky and the village not far off in the distance. The angel's message was brief: "I bring good news" ... "the savior is born" ... "you will find him in a manger." Over the centuries that short message has prompted millions of sermons, and the worship of the shepherds has turned into elaborate rituals in ornate cathedrals as well as plain pageants in simple churches. That is an impressive result for such a simple act.

However, this year I found myself asking: "Is the meaning of Christmas found in our pageantry or is it found in the event of Christmas?" In our efforts to make Christmas festive, have we obscured the mystery of the event itself? Was Reinhold Niebuhr right -- can only poetry communicate the wonder of Christmas?

Tonight I want to talk with you in poetry. Not with words that rhyme, but with thoughts that create images in your mind. I want the Christmas event to touch your hearts.

I realize that we can't physically go to Bethlehem tonight, but I am convinced that the event of Christmas has the power to give our celebration of Christmas a new sense of wonder and meaning.

Imagine yourself on that dark Bethlehem hillside. Listen to the angel: "You will find a baby lying in a manger ..." Lying in a manger -- not in the palace of a king, but in a wooden shelter where sheep huddled together to eat. Picture the town just off in the distance across the open fields. It is a rural village in an out-of-the-way part of Palestine -- hardly at the top of anyone's "places to see" list. It was only Caesar's decree for a census that brought Joseph and Mary there. It is unlikely they would have come otherwise.

It was a long trip from Nazareth (especially by donkey) -- much too long for a woman who was almost nine months pregnant. I can picture the conversation between them: "But, Joseph, I am almost due. I can't go there." "Mary, Caesar has spoken. We have no choice." Because the town was crowded with other travelers, the inns were filled. It was only because a charitable innkeeper realized how pregnant Mary actually was that they were given a place to stay. That is why Mary's baby was born in a manger.

A child was born. It was that simple. Yet that birth was different. The angels' message was to the point: The baby was the Son of God! The mighty God of time and eternity was coming to live with us. In the past, God had spoken through prophets. But this time God was coming to earth in person! Therein lies the wonder of Christmas! It is a face-to-face encounter with the Holy One. Not with a president or a king or a great military commander. With God!

Now, come back to the present so you can allow this event to touch you now. The Christmas event suggests that we can look in three directions to encounter the Holy One today.

First, notice that the shepherds looked up to the sky to hear the angels' message. That is a good place for us to start, especially since "feeling down" is one of life's more common experiences. It happens to all of us to some degree or another, ranging from simple discouragement all the way to depression and despair. Christmas invites us to "look up" even when, and perhaps most especially when, life is "looking down." When life seems to be closing in, look up to see God. Don't be afraid to pray. Don't be afraid to worship. God is here for you. Jesus' words are dependable: "Ask, and it will be given to you! Seek and you will find."

I know we have discovered that our universe doesn't consist of three stories where heaven is up, earth is here, and hell is down. That doesn't make any difference. We simply need to know that God, the Holy One, is behind it all. God has lovingly created us, and God wants us to look to him for strength and support. Whether it is "up" or "out," God is here.

Christmas suggests a second direction in which to look to encounter the Holy One: look around at the everyday world in which you live! God came to earth in a smelly cattle shed -- the last place anyone would expect to find God. But those are the kinds of places where we do find God. I think it's hard to visualize meeting God in everyday life. What does God care about dirty dishes? What does God care about driving children from one school event to another? What does God care about commuting to and from the office?

What does God care about pay bills or repairing a broken faucet or any of a million other everyday things we have to do in this life? What does God care?

Well, when you think about that, let the manger speak to you! Let it show you that God does come to us in the drudgery and routine events of life. God is at the kitchen sink. God does ride the commuter train with you. And, yes, God is even in your home that has more things to repair than you can count and in the struggles to make ends meet on a tight budget. To meet the Christ of Christmas face to face, start by looking up. Then, look around and see what you find!

And then finally, look beyond the world immediately around you! Why? Because God wants the whole world to know that God is there for them, too. I guarantee that as you become a messenger for God, the reality of your encounter with the Holy One will become more vivid.

God is where people are starving and hungry -- where people are powerless and homeless -- where people are fighting or dying -- where people struggle for freedom and justice and human dignity. It is when we look beyond our immediate world that we hear Jesus saying to us: "As you did it for one of the least of these my brothers or sisters, you have done it for me."

Christmas is a mystery which occurs over and over again each time we respond to Christ's command to reach out to the lowliest of society -- and especially those whom society would ignore.

In short, Christmas is an encounter with the Holy One that continues to happen to us as we look up, look around, and look beyond.

But there is one more dimension to the poetry of Christmas that I want you to hear tonight (this morning). Christmas can only be experienced through eyes of faith! If you are in church tonight (today) for the first time, or if you are here tonight (today) looking for proof for your faith, even if you are here tonight (today) as a "skeptic" because the rest of the family insisted that you come, I can think of nothing to say that will be able to "prove" Christmas for you. However, there are a few things I can tell you about with certainty.

1. I do believe that there were shepherds in those fields of Bethlehem that night.
2. I do not need to see the records of the child's birth.
3. I do believe that angels from God told the shepherds of the savior's birth.
4. I do not need a psychological analysis of that phenomenon.

God has spoken to people in so many different ways during the course of history. That God chose to use angels to speak to those shepherds is not a problem for me. I do believe that the shepherds made a speedy trip into Bethlehem to see this wonder first-hand.

I used to think it was a long trip. Not so! Bethlehem is barely more than a stone's throw from the fields where they were grazing their sheep. I also believe that Mary was a virgin and that the child she gave birth to is God's very own Son, even though the medical discipline of obstetrics does not allow for such occurrences. I cannot defend my belief scientifically, but that does not make any difference to me.

Most of all, I believe that in the fullness of time, God fulfilled a promise and came to earth as an infant human person. And I believe that in becoming a person, God so completely identified with us -- through the rest of eternity, that we are now completely identified with God! "His name will be called Emmanuel." "God with Us."

God is now here! That says it all!

Merry Christmas.