

The Shepherd's Story: Jesus, Caesar, the Bali Conference and Squeegee Kids

Luke 2:8-20

By Rev. Linda Yates

December 16, 2007-12-15

St. John's United Church, Halifax, Nova Scotia

Those shepherds - again. We hear the story every Christmas yet we rarely focus on the shepherds and what happened to them as the ground for an entire sermon. It is such a great story. It is also an important story as much for what it does not say as for what it says. This Advent Season we have been about trying to more fully delve into all of those stories that lead up to the birth of the one we call Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus our Saviour or Jesus our Lord.

Well, there are some things you need to know about shepherds. Shepherding seems to have been quite an honoured profession in ancient times. For example, the famous King David was a shepherd. However, by the time Jesus is born, the concentration of wealth was such that most often shepherds did not own their flocks. They were rent-a-shepherds. Owners lived elsewhere in relative comfort and paid these men, who sometimes brought members of their families to travel with them, to look after the flocks. By Jesus' time they were considered, as a group within society, to be among the lowest in stature. Shepherds were generally suspected within the culture of the day as being dishonest because they were always driving the flocks onto other people's land. Shepherds lived with their sheep. Since they were busy tending them in the grazing fields, they were also not likely to be able to get to Temple and were therefore considered to unfaithful, irreligious or possibly even unclean. They were paid subsistence wages. Nonetheless, theirs was work within an industry that kept the ancient world economically afloat by providing wool, meat, and sacrifices for the Temple, milk and leather. Warmth etc...

I have been trying to think of a modern day comparable group; a group upon whom our economic engine and our social and cultural existence depends upon. I think that the most likely candidates are those who collect our garbage. Those who collect our waste get up at dreadful times of the night in all manner of weather doing one of the most physically demanding of jobs. It is a job that carries much potential for work related injuries. Woe, though, to the city that experiences a garbage strike. When that happens suddenly we all become aware of the critical nature of such work for our collective health, economic and aesthetic well being. Despite the essential nature of their work, do we ever think of waste collectors? Do any of us consider inviting them to dinner? At best most of us don't think of them at all. At worst, many of us think of them disparagingly.

So, back to our story from Luke. They shepherds are minding their own business doing their work in the dead of night and an angel appears to the shepherds with an announcement. Oh, you need to know something else. In the Roman world, the world of Empire, it was customary for poets and orators to be hired to declare peace and prosperity at the birth of one who was expected to eventually become Emperor. Food and coin were assembled and distributed to the masses. Trumpets and singers declared that now the world is saved because this child is born who will be Emperor. It is critically important for us to understand that the names that this angel uses are all titles that Caesar claimed for himself. Caesar declared himself to be Saviour of the people; Caesar is Lord; Caesar is the Christ, that is, the Anointed One. What is the writer of Luke saying here? Caesar may have to pay guys with big voices in togas to

announce to the world that he is king and pass out coin and bread to appease the masses. Caesar may demand that people celebrate with the threat of oppressive laws, imprisonment, swords and armies if the bribes did not work. In our gospel story, God announces the birth of Christ with an angel and a heavenly host, no less. The angel declares who Jesus is. Jesus is Saviour; Jesus is the Christ; Jesus is Lord. The irony is, that in revealing who he is, the angel seals Jesus' fate. Luke places the Christmas crib, an animal feeding trough, under the shadow of the cross. And so it continues unto today. The gospel message- the revelation of who God is and what God wants always produces judgement of one kind or another.

A Saviour is born for us. To whom, for whom and what kind of Saviour is this anyway? Well, you would think with such a fabulous introduction that this Messiah who will save his people would be found in a place of power like a palace Hall; a place where he might actually have a chance of improving their lot. That in itself would be a convincing kind of sign. The "sign," the "proof," one would think, should be something that would seal such an amazing declaration. Something suitably amazing would be more like the column of fire described in Exodus or the parting of the seas or the bringing of a plague of toads. What is this amazing sign that the angel reveals to the shepherds? The sign, the frightened shepherds are told, is as painfully common as another baby born to the poor. The proof of God's love is a baby that was placed in an animal feeding trough to be found in a dusty third rate town filled with rowdy, noisy people who have arrived for a census taking by the hated Roman occupiers. The sign is a poor, fragile baby likely to die as did most of the other babies born to poor parents in that time and place - probably before he is not yet five due to malnutrition or disease or violence or all of these.

In our modern day scenario, it might be like this. Our garbage men are gathered around the trucks at 3 o'clock in the morning with their Tim Horton's cupped in frigid hands. Perhaps some of them having one last smoke before they get into their trucks. An angel suddenly appears in front of them. The angel tells them that the guy who is to bring peace and integrity to the world can be found in the person of a baby whose parents are illegal refugees who have found shelter on this cold wintry night in the tool shed of the local Econo Lodge. Now, the waste collector's are expected to see this miracle and then go tell the world.

Can you imagine? In Luke, the shepherds oblige. Do they abandon their flock to do so? They find their way to visit this stressed couple busy with the chores of childbirth in the worst of places. You would think Mary and Joseph could use some of the heavenly host's assurances. At least I think so. After all that trouble, at least Mary could probably use a little heavenly reassurance in the form of angels and heavenly hosts and the like. She doesn't get it - the shepherds do. They tell her about it and she stores up the stories which is a good thing. Mary is going to need them. Mary is the one who sees Jesus through to the cross and the unexpected resurrection. Mary is present for the birth of the church as described in the book of Acts. After sharing with them all that they have heard and seen that night, the shepherds go back to their ordinary lives. But they are changed. Luke reminds us that it is in our ordinary lives where the gospel message is lived out. The shepherds make their way back telling everyone they meet about what they have seen, heard and learned; no matter how crazy everyone thought they were, They gave glory to God. They believed they were part of something God was and is doing that they could not see the "big picture" of.

In our modern day story, the waste collecting men would get in their trucks, but not to pick up the garbage. They would go to the Econo Lodge. check out the story and after seeing

and believing they would go back to their routes and tell everyone they encounter what they saw, heard and understood. They too would glorify God in their ordinary lives.

It might seem like a strangely bare story for a gospel. True enough. However, it is one of bareness and of joy. The stable is bare, the fields are bare but the glory of God floods the story.

The heavenly host sing of peace, which is not just the absence of conflict, but instead is a wholeness of life which God grants to persons and societies through a restoring of balance in all of the forces of creation that influence are lives.¹

If this was the only story told in Luke, it could stand on its own. It is a little mini gospel complete in itself. Jesus is from the house of David through the marriage of Joseph to Mary as was predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures for the genealogy of the Messiah. Jesus is Saviour – he will save his people the angel says. Jesus is the Christ that is he has been anointed by God. Jesus *is Lord*. Caesar is decidedly NOT Lord no matter what he says and no matter what the powers and principalities of the world says.

We have to decide whether we behave like Caesar of old (and all of us, good and loving people, do this in ways we are not totally aware of), or whether we behave like we have heard news of great joy and actually believe it. It means that when the Caesars of the world obstruct agreements at the Bali UN Conference on the Environment that would help save this planet, for example, the heavenly host remind us that God is active and powerful in the voices of the lowly and the faithful – developing countries, young strident activists, people outraged blogging on line, all of you who work for the environmental integrity of the earth. The Caesars of the world can not stand very long in the face of such opposition. They never could.

This gospel story teaches us that when the Caesars of the world, Conservative and Liberal, legislate squeegeeing as a crime, we are called to object. This legislation was put in place for so called “safety” reasons even though it exempts young people collecting for charity from running amok in traffic. This is clearly legislation designed to criminalize poverty. The Caesars know that we are uncomfortable seeing squeegee kids because we are uncomfortable thinking about the circumstances of poverty that put them there and therefore we will not hold the Caesars accountable. Like the Roman masses of old, we are content with the odd coin thrown to us in the form of personal tax cuts. We are satisfied with some allusions to a few nursing home beds and no cuts to our personal health care. Caesar knows most of us well. How soon we forget that it was a squeegee kids that saved that woman’s life on the commons as she was being attacked by a group of people. How soon we forget the politeness, the agility with which squeegee kids clean our windshields for the odd coin we throw them. The question of religious popular culture has been what would Jesus do, (WWJD)? A better question might be, given the story of the shepherds, who would the heavenly host appear to? I am betting it would be the squeegee kids but then we wouldn’t believe them, would we?

We are at a new epoch of time. The Caesars of the world know this, I think and they are scared. Speaking out and connecting with one another is making a difference. We had a visit from Javier De Leon who talked about the violence visited upon his people when they refused to sell their land to Goldcorp. Some of them were arrested during a peaceful protest and charged. Partly, because of the very public observation by groups within North America via letters to

¹ Fred Craddock, (Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching - Luke, Louisville, Knoxville Press, 1990), p. 36

governments and other, justice seems to have been done. Many were acquitted and the other protesters received fines. The new painful reality for Caesar is that the world is watching. We are watching each other now. All of us. We recently had supper with a friend of ours, a member of the RCMP, who was lamenting the bad press that the YouTube video sent around the world of the RCMP tazing Robert Dziekanski, who subsequently died in the Vancouver airport. Our friend seemed to think it very unfair that someone was able to record it on a cell phone and then put it on the web, causing irreparable damage to the institution of the RCMP. I replied that for decades the RCMP has been watching us, the difference is now we are watching them too. We are all watching each other. We begin a new age in which there is increasingly, a building sense of the levelling of some of the information playing field. Caesar is worried about that. What will Caesar do?

As the planet heats up, we suddenly are realizing that we are one giant big community on this ball hurtling through space. We share the planet and not just with other humans. Nature itself, the ground and being of the beauty of God, is crying out. Whom will we listen to, Caesar who guarantees our RRSP's won't lose ground, or some small strange visiting Guatemalan man who reminds us that our Canadian mining companies are polluting the part of the planet where HE lives? What will we choose to do? Whom will we listen to? Whose declaration, that they are Lord, do we accept and believe? These are our choices. Caesar or God – whom do you work for?

For myself, I am always amazed at God. God believes in us. God believes in you - in your inherent capacity for goodness. So, on the eve of the UN Climate Conference in Bali, I know that this *can* be an age, because of our capacity for goodness, in which peace, true peace, that of wholeness of life that the angels sang about is possible. Will it happen? I don't know. That is where faith comes in. Faith that no matter how small, every commitment, and every action counts, whether that is writing a letter, speaking a prayer, carrying a protest sign or just changing your light bulbs.

So what of our refuse collectors? They have been changed and challenged. God loves them. They have seen that. They have also seen that to be loved by God can be joyous and can be difficult. Let's put you in the picture. Imagine for a moment that you are walking down your driveway. You are thinking something looks not quite right about the guy picking up your compost container. He is different somehow. You go out to chat with him. He tells you this amazing, (ridiculous really), story about angels and the Econo lodge and some unfortunate refugee family. You are stunned and sceptical. But something about how he tells it and something about the message within it resonates with you. He is naming something you have felt within yourself - some kind of longing, some kind of connection with God that has been moving within you. After the garbage man moves on to the next house you are left staring at him. In the telling of the story, something has shifted within you. What new tidings of great joy does God have for you? More tellingly, what does God expect you to do because of it?

Sources Used:

Brown, Raymond, A Coming Christ In Advent, Liturgical Press, 1988.

Brown, Raymond, An Adult Christ At Christmas, Liturgical Press, 1988.

Craddock, Fred, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching - Luke, Louisville: Knoxville Press, 1990.