

## The Holy Night

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What would we do without Luke's Christmas story? No crèche scenes at home, a million Christmas pageants gone. No trip to Bethlehem, no Innkeeper, no angels in the sky, no shepherds, no animals, no child in the manger. Our imaginations would be impoverished! Who would want to give up children playing all the parts in Christmas pageants? What part have you played?

There was a book written years ago by the title, *All the Damned Angels*. The title came from a children's pageant. There was a shepherd boy standing by a girl in an angel costume. When she spread her wings, they pushed him off stage. He said, "This would be fun if it weren't for all the damned angels!"

So let us treasure and ponder the Christmas story today, as Mary treasured and pondered it all in her heart. And let us consider especially the first of the questions we are carrying with us through Luke: Who am I in this story, and in God's larger story of salvation?

We begin with Caesar Augustus. In order to fund the empire and control the populace, he ordered a census and empire-wide taxation. It reached all the way to Bethlehem, a tiny town in a remote country controlled by the empire.

Luke set his gospel on the stage of world history: “In the days of King Herod of Judea”, and “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed,” registered, enrolled, conscripted. Caesar Augustus was literally called “Savior of the world.” He liked the sound of it. But Luke is telling us that the Savior of the world is not sitting on a throne in Rome but is a tiny child in a manger in Bethlehem. But I’m getting ahead of the story.

## II

Mary and Joseph needed to make the three day journey to Bethlehem to be enrolled. It had to have been a perilous journey with Mary so far along in her pregnancy. We picture her on a donkey, with Joseph walking by her side.

When they got there the baby was ready to be born, and when the baby’s ready, we must all get ready. They went to an inn to stay the night, but the innkeeper said there was no room there and pointed them to a stable in the back, more likely a shepherd’s cave where shepherds housed themselves and their animals at night.

The innkeeper is rarely seen sympathetically, but Frederick Buechner places himself inside the Inn-keeper and puts these words in his mouth:

*“Do you know what it is like to run an inn—to run a business, a family, to run anything in this world for that matter, even your own life? It is like being lost in a forest of a million trees”, said the Innkeeper, “and each tree is a thing to be done. Is there fresh linen on all the beds? Did the children put on their coats before they went out? Has the letter been written...? Is there enough money left in the bank?...A million trees. A million things...Until finally we have eyes for nothing else...Later that night when the baby came, I was not there...I was lost in the forest somewhere, the unenchanted forest of a million trees...All your life long, you wait for your own true love to come—we all of us do—our destiny, our joy, our heart’s desire. So how am I to say it...? When he came, I missed him. Pray for me, brothers and sisters. Pray for the Innkeeper. Pray for me, and for us all.”<sup>1</sup>*

### III

Then “there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.” Shepherds were on the lower end of society’s ladder, low wage earners, more migrant farmer than rosy-cheeked choir boy. Last to be hired, first to be fired, last to go to college, first to be sent to war. They were more Merle

Haggard than Johann Sebastian Bach, more Hank Williams than George Friedrich Handel. They were more apt to be singing “Help Me Make it Through the Night” than “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us.” They were of sketchy reputation and, so scholars say, not allowed to be witnesses in a court of law. But the angel of the Lord appeared to *them*.

When the angel appeared, they were “sore afraid”, as the old King James Version put it. When they saw the angel all wrapped in glory’s light, one of them probably put down his flask and said, “I’ve just had my last drink!”

But the angel calmed their fears and said the immortal words:

For, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you, (yes, unto you!) is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Jesus’ salvation is a universal salvation, and it is at the same time as singular as to a weather-worn shepherd in the fields. God’s salvation is to all people, and it is to *you*.

This message was a subversive one, a counter-theology to the theology of the empire. The Savior of the world was not Caesar enthroned in Rome, but a child in a cow’s feeding trough, a make-shift crib for a make-shift night.

The angel tells the shepherds where to find the child: sheltered in a shepherd's cave, lying in a manger and swaddled with bands of cloth. The upside-downing of the world in Mary's song was coming true. Then the whole night sky was lit up with heaven's choir praising God and singing,

Glory to God in the highest  
and on earth peace, good will to all!

Here is the Christmas message: The glory of God is peace, good will to all. And we get to bear that message with our lips and with our lives.

The shepherds ran to find the child. Ran! Good news always sends our hearts and our legs racing. Then they ran to tell others what they had seen, shepherds, so low on society's ladder they could not bear witness in court, now called by God to bear witness to the best news that we've ever heard:

God is with us, with us all. Immanuel. And this God is pure love.

The text says that those who heard the words were amazed at what the shepherds said. Annie Dillard, one of America's great writers says: "You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment."<sup>2</sup> What astonished you? Are you astonishable?

What could be more astonishing than this? God in flesh, in this tiny child! The old black preacher/poet put it this way: “God came down the back stairs of heaven with a baby in His arms”. I’ve thought this week about the image of the “back stairs of heaven”. Remember the back stairs that slaves and servants used to use?. Those were the stairs God used to bring us salvation.

#### IV

The text says that Mary “treasured these things and pondered them in her heart”, and so do we this day.

Jesus said the greatest commandment was to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and then to love our neighbor as we have been loved by God.

How do we love a God whom we cannot see, a God who sometimes feels as remote as the far reaches of the galaxies in space?

But here, but now, God has become so tiny and vulnerable that we can hold God in our arms, swaddle him, touch him, rock him and adore him. There, loving God with our hearts is suddenly not hard at all. Children have been helping us love God all along!

Where have you found yourself in the story today? Where would you like to find yourself?

In the Innkeeper with too much on his mind, but wanting another chance to spy the child? In Mary, the divine feminine of God, giving birth, holding the child? Joseph, still bewildered by the mystery of it all but faithfully by Mary's side? Or the shepherds, the least likely to hear good news? In Jesus God has come to "the least, the last and the lost," as the expression goes. What are the least and last and lost parts of yourself wanting to be found? The parts of yourself you hide but which want desperately to be found?

Or maybe you are the choir of angels singing "Gloria"? Augustine once said God wants us to be an "Alleluia" from the top of our heads to the tip of our toes. This season God wants us to be a "Gloria" from the top of our heads to the tip of our toes. I know the choir has helped me sing Gloria today and this season. (I'm not so sure about the *angel* part, especially the men's section).

Or maybe this: to be one of the crowd looking in, then drawing closer, closer until you are there at the manger and the child's tiny hand grips your finger. And you see his face which looks like the face of every child you have ever seen, and you know God is with us in everything.

I think I know who I am this day. I'm the director of the Christmas pageant, who leaves the director's chair and all the directing and puts on a costume and joins the crowded stable, and, filled with wonder, finds himself singing another's words:

What can I give him, poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb.

If I were a wise man, I would do my part.

Yet what I can I give him

give, yes give, my heart.

“Holiness happens” writes Buechner about that hallowed night. May it happen for you, in you today.

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1. Frederick Buechner, (N.Y.: Seabury Press, 1966), pp.66-68

2. Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1989) p. 68.