

Peace, Good Will to All

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Peace has been our central theme this season, and now here we are at the manger. Isaiah had dreamed our future:

For unto us a child is born

unto us a son is given...

and his name will be called

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

I re-read *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* this week, about the year the terrible Herdman kids were in the Christmas Pageant. In rehearsal when Imogene Herdman heard all the names for Jesus: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”, she exclaimed, “He’d never get out of first grade if he had to write all that!”

I

Tonight is the child’s night, the children all around us, the child we can become again that we might enter the kingdom of God. It is one reason I love

children's drawings of the manger scene. Mary, having just given birth to Jesus, Joseph still star-struck in love with Mary, still baffled about the ways of God. The animals you might find in a barn, the child lying in a manger, a cow's feeding trough, a make-shift crib for a make-shift night.

And here come the shepherds with eyes as wide as saucers looking in to see the child. And wise men from the east far across the desert bringing their gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh, kneeling in worship. "O Come Let Us Adore Him".

And a star overhead, like the beautiful crooked stars children draw.

Reynolds Price, the famous novelist, tells of his earliest memories of church in his eastern North Carolina home. He was four or five and on his way to see the annual Christmas pageant on Christmas Eve because a grown-up friend was playing Mary. The child, he suspected, was a doll, to avoid any wailing. He was enthralled by it all, and went home with what he now calls "an urgent message. Here was the message:

A child is the center of Christmas.

All these adults are gathered

to watch him. A child is the

center of an entire faith.

I am a child. I matter in  
the world.

And so, I would add, do you. There's a place in O Holy Night that I especially  
love:

.... (Then) he appeared and the soul felt its worth.

Your soul too.

## II

The shepherds may be my favorite characters in the scene. Less choir boys, more migrant farmers, at the bottom rung of society's ladder. Last to be hired, first to be fired. First to be conscripted for war, last to get a mortgage. Their favorite songs were not from Johann Sebastian Bach but Hank Williams, not Handel's *Messiah* but "Help Me Make it Through the Night." Are you old enough to remember the fresh-scrubbed sons on the T.V. show "My Three Sons"? The shepherds were more like Larry, Darrell and Darrell from the old "Bob Newhart Show".

And yet, it was to *them* that the angel of the Lord appeared that night, with God's glory shining all about them. Of course they were afraid, We only *think* we would not be. (I once saw a child's drawing of the manger scene. The angel was this gigantic rectangle form as big as a house, looming over the manger. That may

have been closer to how the shepherd's felt!) "Do not be afraid", the angel said to them—and to us whose hearts get so bound in fear.

Then the last words they would have expected to hear:

Behold, I bring you (yes *you* hiding behind your sheep) good news of great joy which shall be to all people (but first to you). For to *you* is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord.

Then the angel told them where to find the child and the whole sky was filled with light shining like "shook foil". Vibrating with the sound of a sky full of angels singing:

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

*Peace, good will to all.* Peace, shalom, well-being, wholeness, reconciliation, God's perfect harmony. The gift of God and our holy calling.

And *goodwill*. Hearts, minds now expanded in good will to others. I love the word *magnanimity*. It means large-heartedness, large soul-ness. Wishing and working for others' best. We all have good will for some, but on this night of nights our hearts swell, and the circle grows.

And *for all*. God's good will, or good pleasure, as the Greek word puts it, is *for all* or else it is not God's will. "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace good will to all. The Glory of God is peace, good will to all."<sup>1</sup>

In *Alice in Wonderland* we meet the Mock Turtle who used to be a real turtle. Alice meets him and he begins to explain his education. To begin with, "Reeling and Writhing"—instead of Reading and Writing, and instead of the four branches of arithmetic Addition, Subtraction, Multiplication and Division, he took "Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision." That sounds like our world today, but this night, and more nights if we remember this one well, we are given instead, "Peace, goodwill to all."

The shepherds made their way, racing to the manger. When I was in High School, about the age of Christian and Bartelo, our church would put on musical extravaganzas as we re-enacted the Nativity.

We teenage boys would always be given the part of the shepherds, dressed in modified bathrobes and dish towels fashioned as a head dress, and with fake beards glued onto our beardless cheeks. Year after year we heard the angel's message and went down the church aisles singing:

Let us now go to Bethlehem  
and see this thing which has come to pass  
which the Lord has made known unto us!

Then after the service we would put our coats and ties back on but *keep the beards* and go down the street to Shoney's Big Boy for hamburgers.

But first, back in the church, we made our way to the manger, as now we all do, playing our favorite parts and silently, silently move with sudden shyness to see the child who changed the world.