

## The Wonder of the Nativity: Shepherds, Angels and Stars

Luke 2:8-20; Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11

Our manger is full now, and we ponder, as Mary pondered, the wonder of the nativity. You may find your own place there among the animals, the shepherds, the kings. There may be a few out there who want to be baby Jesus!

An artist friend of mine, Adrian Martinez, painted a biblical scene for the narthex at Broadway Baptist Church: Rebecca at the well. There in the lower corner was a dog looking on. Why is the dog there? I asked Adrian. He replied: “the dog is me.” Looking at the manger, where, who, might you be today?

Our children have been leading our wonder and delight as they have brought their figures to the manger. Polar bears, anyone, or giraffes? Sheep, a shepherd, a wise man from the orient? Where are you here?

### I

The shepherds, of course, are here. Who they were and how they got there is an endlessly fascinating story. They were, as I’ve offered before, on the lower rungs of that society. Hired to work seasonal jobs, like the migrant workers of their time and ours.

To use sitcoms some of you remember, they were less *My Three Sons* and more like Larry, Darrell and Darrell from the *Bob Newhart Show*. Less Johann Sebastian Bach and more “Help Me Make It Through the Night”.

But on this holy night the angels appeared to the shepherds *first!* Minding their owners’ sheep, the angel of the Lord appeared to them, the glory of the Lord blazed round them and they were terrified. I like the old King James words best: They were “sore afraid!” Some of them were not quite ready to be met by an angel of the Lord! Know what I mean?

“Do not be afraid”, the angel said to their fearful hearts—and ours. And then the unimaginable good news: “For behold I bring you—yes *you* hiding behind your sheep—good news of great joy which shall be to all people.”

We all know that in this world good news for some is not always good news for all of us. But the Christmas good news is good news for all. Yes *all* people. *All*—that most beautiful of words in the Bible. The good news of God is always at the same time good news for you as a person and good news for the whole world, for all. Else it is not God’s good news.

“For unto you is born this day—we can almost say the words along with the angel—in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.”

Then the sign—which is another word for “directions”:

You will find the child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

The shepherds ran to the stable—the shepherd’s cave which housed animals at night. They knew the place.

And the “manger”, a cow’s feeding trough, a makeshift crib for a makeshift night. You can imagine them almost stumbling over themselves as they ran.

When I was a teenager, every Christmas my father directed a Christmas pageant full of music. The teenaged boys were always the shepherds. We wore converted bathrobes as our costumes and wore fake beards on our faces. I can still sing the song we sang from Luke’s account:

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

Then after the pageant we put on our coats and ties and kept on the beards we could not grow on our faces and went to Shoney’s Big Boy down the street to eat!

Ah, the shepherds.

I wonder as I wander out under the sky  
That Jesus the Savior did come for to die.  
For poor onr’y people like you and like I.  
I wonder as I wonder

When Mary birthed Jesus was in a cow stall  
With wise men and farmers and shepherds and all.  
But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall  
And the promise of ages it did then recall.

Yes, for poor ordinary people like us and in the most ordinary of places. The wonder of it. God came born not in a king's palace but in a cow stall.

## II

But there were three others there at the manger, three wise men, or magi, from the east, probably from Persia or modern Iran. The magi were wisdom scholars and astronomers who read scriptures from all religions and searched the sky for signs of God's comings.

They saw an unusual occurrence in the sky, a bright star. Some think it could have been a super nova, a star beginning to explode. The James Webb Telescope has recently sent out photos of such stars. Or was it a comet, or was it a convergence of planets which happened about that time?

Whatever they saw in the Hebrew Scriptures and the heavens, they took it as a sign a King of the Jews about to be born.

So off they traveled over many miles through the desert. After a visit with King Herod and a conversion with ominous overtones, they found their way to Bethlehem, a tiny village in an occupied country in a far corner of the Roman Empire.

Through the centuries we've made them kings, with particular names, ages, skin colors and hair coloring.

Why did Matthew include them? To show the universality of God's good news in Christ, a light to all the nations.

What do you think Mary thought when she saw them coming? A Lutheran pastor, Joann Post and a musician friend of hers are writing a Christmas Cantata with ten songs. One of the songs is about Mary's welcome of the three strangers at her door. Joann Post writes of this song:

As we imagine it, she greets her guests as though she had been expecting them, flinging the door open to them as ultimately to the world.

That's what Matthew had in mind.

#### IV

Where does your wondering or wonderment or questioning arise today? The scriptures say of Mary that she "pondered them in her heart." Not with her

mouth, but in her heart. What is your heart pondering today as we gaze at the manger?

Sue and I watched the 1965 Christmas classic “A Charlie Brown Christmas” this week. We were prompted by a New York Times opinion piece, “My Jewish Charlie Brown Christmas” by a Jewish writer who calls the movie a “one-of-a-kind wonder”. In many ways it is an unusual Christmas show. It has a meditative, at times melancholy tone. Its jazz score has a wistfulness along with its joyfulness.

The movie almost did not make it to our television sets. The jazz score was not traditional and cheery enough. A story about a boy being bullied was a loser of a Christmas story. And Charles Schultz, the comic strip’s writer, wanted ordinary children’s voices in the show, not professional adult readers. Most of all, the studio heads were terrified at the idea of actual Christian scripture being part of the script! It was doomed, they thought. But of course they were all wrong.

Ironically, Abraham Twerski, an Orthodox rabbi and psychiatrist who befriended Schultz later in his life, calls it “the greatest half-hour of American T.V. ever made.”

The show ponders the meaning of Christmas, and by extension every religious holiday. Lucy at one point says, in her superior knowing, to Charlie Brown:

We all know that Christmas is a big commercial racket. It's run by an Eastern syndicate, you know.

Charlie Brown is having a very bad Christmas. His mailbox is empty of Christmas cards he had hoped for, and his sadness has made him feel even more alone at this supposed-to-be joyful time of year. Ever felt that way?

Charlie Brown goes to see Lucy, who is behind her psychiatrist booth, for help. She tries to change his mood and cheer him up by asking him to direct the annual Christmas pageant. As they rehearse, Charlie Brown at one point asks earnestly: "What is Christmas all about?"

Then comes the turning point in the show. Linus volunteers the answer. He goes on stage with his omnipresent blanket and with the soundtrack now silent recites the Christmas story in his small voice:

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night....

You probably remember the other part of the story. The cast sends Charlie Brown out to buy a Christmas tree, a big flashy aluminum Christmas tree, preferably pink. He passes all of those by and finds a sickly-looking twig of a Christmas tree and brings it back. The rest of the children laugh at the tree and at

him, but when they later decorate and light it, it glows with beauty and they gather around it with joy.

It touches our hearts too, this show.

As for us here gathered together before the manger, the shepherds, the animals, angels, stars and wise men, we see the glimmer of a truth almost too wonderful to believe: that the God of the universe knows us and cares. That God's face shines upon *us* with favor and delight. And that the Love that made the planets and the stars came to our world in the life of a tiny child who would, despite all odds, become the light of the world.

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Our Christmas Eve benediction is from Rumi, early Sufi poet and mystic:

Be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder. Help someone's soul heal. Walk out of your house like a shepherd.

Amen