

Advent IV: The Shepherds
Luke 2: 8-18
12/22/13
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This year during the Advent season I have chosen to not follow the traditional lectionary readings---too many years of doing that perhaps, so we have jumped around here and there. Two weeks ago I reflected on Mary and Joseph and the question of whether we believe God still breaks forth in our lives to use us as vessels of divine work. Last Sunday our souls were lifted by the music of the “*Magnificat*” – Mary’s song of a world turned upside down by the arrival of God. For today I would like to draw us towards the Shepherds as they keep watch over their flocks by night.

Listen and imagine as I read to you from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verses 8-18:

Luke 2:8-18

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

We traditionally hear this portion of the birth of Jesus on Christmas Eve but rarely do we get to spend any time on its significance and symbol.

In studying scripture we find that each Gospel writer has a unique and particular agenda in mind as they tell the story of Jesus' life and mission. In Matthew the focus includes grounding Jesus in history and creating order and structure in a new religion as it begins to take form out of Judaism. The coming of the Wise Men we associate with the birth of Jesus is only found in Matthew, Shepherds are not even mentioned.

In the Gospel of Mark there is no birth story at all, we jump right into the cry of John the Baptist at the River and the Baptism of Jesus as an adult.

And there is no birth story in the Gospel of John as well as it begins with an affirmation of the Word of God coming and dwelling among us as Light in the darkness.

In the Gospel of Luke the author is testifying to the birth of Jesus as a hero to the poor and the outcast. The conception of Jesus by a young, poor woman named Mary who in turn sings a powerful song of justice for the poor and then the inclusion of the shepherds, the poorest of the poor - are the writer's way of declaring that these are the people for whom Jesus came (and that their economic status is not a sign of their value or worth in God's eyes). Scholar John Dominic Crossan writes: "Angels were supposed to appear to Priests, not shepherds!"

And then throughout the entire Gospel, Jesus responds to those on the edges of society who need healing and economic restoration.

I am sure you have noticed that Pope Francis has entered his new role with this *very* proclamation as his focus.

He has been shaped by Liberation Theology, a theology that became popular in the Catholic Church of Latin America in the 1950's and 60's, the term was coined in 1971 by the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez who wrote one of its most famous books, **A Theology of Liberation*** which is very much alive in Central and South America, where Pope Francis spent many years as a priest.

Liberation Theology is exactly what the writer of Luke proclaims, that Jesus came to proclaim that oppression and poverty is NOT God's plan. God's dream is to liberate the poor and Jesus is the incarnation – the very human embodiment of that liberation and dream.

I hear Pope Francis challenging not only the Catholic Church but anyone who will listen, that unregulated Capitalism and consumerism is like a huge boulder tearing down a hill – gaining size and speed and destroying anything in its path from people to the environment.

Pope Francis is challenging NOT just Catholics – but anyone who will listen that the more we religious people spend our time arguing over gay rights or doctrine or birth control – the easier it is to avoid the true and important and life-threatening challenges of poverty and greed.

I admit I would not have expected this prophetic message to be coming from the **Pope** of the Catholic Church at this time in their history, it affirms that the holy power we call God, does indeed work in mysterious and surprising ways.

This year as I have pondered these readings and this focus from the Gospel of Luke – in particular Mary’s “Magnificat” and the significance of the Shepherds – I am struck that this message is not really for us, good news – is it?

For the most part we are not the poor and oppressed that Luke is referring to.

For us, Luke’s Gospel is challenging news – it is prophetic news that we may or may not want to hear.

Jesus’ birth and message was/is really meant to turn our world upside down – isn’t it?

It is easy to lose this prophetic challenge in the nostalgia, the busyness, and the beauty of these seasons of Advent and Christmas, isn’t it?

It is easy to lose Mary’s absolutely challenging words of the Magnificat from last week in the stunning beauty of Vivaldi’s rendition and in Latin no less! In all its beauty we don’t hear Mary proclaim: “God’s arm will scatter the proud” or “he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

While there are many beautiful and valuable symbols and messages in the Christmas story for all people, rich and poor, it is absolutely crucial that we who are privileged and comfortable, not lose the profound and challenging message of the ***birth of a liberator for the poor and the oppressed.***

We are not simply remembering the birth of some mystical, holy and quiet teacher that wrote a few good books – we are remembering and celebrating the birth of a liberator who in-fleshed a very bold and challenging message on behalf of the poor and the oppressed.

What are your thoughts on the liberation message of Luke's Jesus --- on it being challenging news for us rather than good news ---

What might this message mean for our church as we move into a new year?

How might it shape our mission and focus?

Let us pray...

In the spirit of prayer I would like to share with you a poem from Howard Thurman, a writer and professor who died in 1981:

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flock,

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among brothers,

To make music in the heart.

(Howard Thurman, "The Work of Christmas")

*Wikipedia on Liberation Theology