

Christmas Day 2011

The Christmas story, both from the Bible and from a few legends to fill in the blanks, is very familiar. We know the outline and the details, especially as Luke's gospel presents them. We know the main players and we remember whose children played them in the pageant: Mary, Joseph, the innkeeper, angels, shepherds, wisemen, Herod, and the cameo top-billing head of the cast who has no lines and remains invisible and yet whose decree sets the whole drama in motion: Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. All familiar. Nothing to add. But have we considered the distinctive voices through which the story is told? Sometimes the medium is the message.

There is a **Heavenly Voice**, spoken through the angels. It is a voice of comfort and courage first--"be not afraid." "Fear not," the angels say by way of introduction. They always know what to say and it is always the same: Don't be afraid. For some of us, religion used to be in the guilt and fear business. God was the source of everything humans did not understand, like thunder and lightning and earthquakes and floods and devastating fires and great winds, what insurance companies call "acts of God." So God was pretty scary. The "great and powerful Oz" relied on secrecy and lots of flashing lightning and rumbling thunder and colorful smoke to keep subjects in subjection. Subjects of God bowed and

scraped in the same way that subjects of medieval earthly lords did, entering the awe-inspiring throne room with fear and trembling and whispers, removing their hats, bowing their heads, getting down on their knees, and speaking groveling words of deference only when spoken to. “Lord, in your mercy,” and, “Your humble servant, your Majesty.” The trouble with this Almighty “God of the gaps” is that as our human knowledge and control of once mysterious forces expands, the place for all-powerful royal God in our lives shrinks. When Toto pulls back the curtain, “the great and powerful Oz” no longer seems so great and powerful. The gaps get smaller and God gets smaller right along with them. We lose our sense of awe and wonder as God retreats from center stage.

The seventeenth century Enlightenment and democratic revolutions in the last couple of centuries have changed the way we think about authority. We’re not so much afraid of God any more. But we do live in times captured by anxiety and fear, and more often than not we expect to hear a daily litany of “bad news” rather than good. It is this fear that drove the U.S. to invade Iraq for no good reason, and it is this fear that causes states to legalize the concealed carry of weapons.

We do not quite know what to make of the angelic message bearing “good news of great joy.” But that is the Christmas content of the

heavenly voice: “Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth.” On this Christmas day we try to tune out the cacophony of fearful, bad news voices and listen for God's hopeful promise of love being born and changing everything. The heavenly voice is no ethereal cosmic message floating around in space. It is a singing voice directed at human life on earth in a “scandal of particularity.” In a particular place (Palestine), at a particular time (two thousand years ago), and addressed to a particular audience (shepherds out in the fields watching their flocks by night). “Glory to God in the highest and peace to all the earth” was first heard there, then and to them. But the song of the angels goes on. As we sing our Glorias the heavenly voice comes here, now and to us. Christmas starts with this heavenly voice in a choir of angels. But it does not end there, and there are other voices in the Christmas chorus.

The shepherds add a **Voice from the Margins**. Shepherds are not the powerful elite who may have expected to be the first to hear news of a Messiah. They are the poor at the edges of established society. They are marginal people. We should not romanticize the shepherds. Their lives are hard and their work, though important, does not receive the respect it deserves. They have neither position nor wealth, neither status nor power. The shepherds are socially, politically and economically marginal. Their need tunes their ears to that which is more humble and common than royal, rich or righteous. You have to wonder about those

shepherds on the hillsides of Bethlehem. Did the choir of angels give them an exclusive concert, just for them, or did these poor shepherds happen to be the only ones in the right place at the right time, an audience with “ears to hear” like no others?

Christmas is a season for us to listen to love's voice from unexpected and humble places; from among those whom Jesus calls the "least of these our brothers and sisters," from among the “last who shall be first” in the kingdom of God. Last in earthly benefits, it is the marginal people who are the first to hear and recognize God's "Good News". They long for salvation, redemption, something “completely different.” They are looking for a new day, a new and more just arrangement of things. They are the least invested in the present order. They have the least to lose if things change. Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor,” a reflection of the gospel revolution which turns the world upside down. When we listen for and really hear the voice of the poor, we give ourselves a chance to hear God's voice as well, always a voice from the margins. This voice at the margins is the heart of the voice of Christmas.

Jesus' mother, Mary, herself a marginal person from the peasant class, hears and treasures **Voices in the Heart**. In the heart of Mary the song of the angels and the cry of the poor take root. In her song, the Magnificat, Mary herself sings of the kingdom of God revolution: the

poor are lifted up and the mighty are brought low. At the end of Luke's Christmas story, we read that Mary pondered all these things in her heart, as only a mother can do. Christmas does touch our hearts. The tiny baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, is a heartfelt thing. The holy family together around that manger, with the sheep, donkeys and oxen, the pigeons, and the adoration and gifts of the Magi, this image is a heartfelt thing.

For some Christmas brings pain, because they can't quite share the joy or because someone precious isn't there to share the season. For others, there are wonderful and warm memories that make the season bright with joy and hope, even beyond the lights, glitter and trappings. With hearts of faith, may we treasure today that which Mary treasured, pondering "these things" in our heart, and savoring the impact of the angel's announcement that Jesus is come to save. This voice is the one that can redeem and enrich every season of our hearts, and this voice is the one that stands a chance of changing the heart of the world.

The shepherds, as they return to their lives and work on the hillsides and in the villages, claim a new voice, a **Public Voice**. They don't keep the "good news" to themselves but share it with "great joy." It transforms them and opens life as they had never imagined. It leads them to new lives of praise. In his Christmas sermon, Martin Luther said that the

shepherds did not shave their heads and become monks, but returned to their vocation with a new sense of purpose and used their calling to glorify God and share the good news with others. The public voice of Christmas assures that the birth of Jesus is not lost in the obscurity and antiquity of that Bethlehem manger so long ago.

Without that public voice, there is no Christmas for us. Without that public voice, the birth of Jesus is no more than an obscure and forgotten footnote in ancient history. Without that public voice, Christmas becomes nothing more than a private or family moment of retreat from the world and its troubles, a fleeting haven in a heartless world. If the shepherds had not gone public, the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem would have passed among shepherds around their campfires and gone no further.

May we also find our public voice this Christmas season. Transformed by our discovery of the Christ, may we proclaim with great joy the power of God's love and begin to live lives of genuine praise. May **our voices** offer the gifts of hope, peace, love and joy to all. It is in our own participation in the public voice that the voices of heaven, the heart and the margins begin to make a difference. Our voices are needed not only in the liturgy of the church, the prayers, the scripture readings, and the singing, but in the world. Our voices are needed not only for the

exchange of formal greetings for a few weeks in December, but throughout the year. Our voices are needed to occupy Wall Street and Main Street, the capital square and the town square, to remind the Caesars and other heads of state, the Herods and other governors, that this is the beginning of a new day: for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, and of his reign there shall be no end.

Lift every voice and sing and let the heavens ring!

Christ the Savior of the World is born. Glory to God and peace to all the earth. Hallelujah!