

Christmas Eve Reflections

Sensing Christmas – The Sights of Christmas

The Sight of the Travelers and the Stable Luke 2:1-7

Reflection

We begin the story with the sight of a pregnant teenager and her husband making a trek of about 100 km from Nazareth to Bethlehem or about as far as Thunder Bay to Red Rock. In our stories we often assume there was a donkey for them, but there is no mention of a donkey in the birth narrative. So Mary, with her small frame, belly swollen with a baby growing inside her, may have walked, and Joseph with her, the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

The couple would likely have journeyed with others for protection and companionship. And though we sit here in the cold of winter, and think of Mary in the cold, it is more probable that Mary and Joseph were traveling in dusty, dry, and hot conditions.

A room was not available to them after their long journey whether at an inn or at someone's home who may have had a guest room, as most homes did provide for hospitality. And so even the sight of the stable, or a place where animals were kept, may have provided at least some hope of shelter for them. It was under these conditions that Mary gave birth to Jesus, with Joseph at her side, and only after labour and delivery of the child would there have been rest as she placed the babe in the manger.

The Sight of the Angels Luke 2:8-14

Reflection

The story of the angels and the shepherds are so intertwined it is difficult to separate them. The Shepherds are minding their own business, making sure that the sheep are safe from harm and trying to get some rest. And then an angel appears, stands before them in fact. This isn't an angel way up in the sky, it is right in front of them and we are told that the glory of the Lord shone around them.

Now we get a little common place about angels, we like them on top of our Christmas trees, we buy angel figurines and place them on a shelf, and wear them as jewelry. They are symbols, but how terrifying and amazing it would have been to actually encounter an angel.

This is a time when there are no street lamps, the hillsides and fields are dark. Only the moon or stars would have pierced the darkness, maybe a campfire for warmth. And angels, well it is not as if this was a regular occurrence. Just as it is hard for us to get our minds around such an event, it was no easier for the shepherds. Yet this story of angels announcing the news of a Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord, being born on this night made a multitude of angel praise God and believers out of a hodge podge group of shepherds.

The Sight of the Shepherds Luke 2:15-20

Reflection.

On the night that Jesus was born some pretty amazing things happened, just as one might expect if God's son was born. Though the shepherds were surprised and terrified, they must also have been greatly moved by the angel that came to them as they were taking care of sheep out in a field. This angel told them that the special baby Jesus was born and that this would change everything. This baby, the one called Messiah, would save people. And as if one angel were not enough to get their attention, then a whole multitude of angels came and the whole sky shone bright. Together the angels praised God. This was important news, and not something to be kept to one's self.

This event was enough for the shepherds to leave the field, head into town and find this baby. They knew they would find the baby lying in a manger, which was not where you would usually find a baby, so that would help them know that they had the right place and people. After they found Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, they began to tell everyone they met about the child and what the angels had told them.

The fact that it was shepherds who got this news has a great deal to do with us. Shepherds were not very special people, they were regular ordinary and often poor people. But the angels bringing the message of Jesus to them demonstrated how much God cares about the ordinary people of the world, people like you and me, and particularly those who are the most vulnerable of society. God loves us beyond our understanding, and when we experience it, that love is something that all of us can share with everyone we know, just like the shepherds did.

We are often very quiet about our faith and most of us never speak about it outside of showing up to church. But this is good news, the angels said it, the shepherds believed it, and it made them seek out the baby. Once they saw Jesus, they did not keep this news to themselves. They shared it!

The Sight of the Magi, the star, the gifts Matthew 2:1-12

Reflection

Even though many manger scenes have a star above and wise men or kings as part of the act, it is important to note that there was likely two years separating the event of the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the wise men to where Jesus and his parents were now living. Not likely the family was still hanging out in that stable with the manger.

Still these sights, that of the star and the wise men with their gifts are a significant part of the story. The star was a sign of the fulfillment of an Old testament prophecy found in the book of Numbers 24:17. Just as Jesus birth was seen as the fulfillment of a prophecy from Isaiah.

The visit of the wise men to the court of King Herod was one that would affect an entire generation whose children were slaughtered in Herod's attempt to make sure his status would not be threatened. When the Magi asked "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" that was an immediate political threat to Herod. From the first to the last Jesus was a political threat, he destabilized the powerful and influential. And for those of us who believe, Jesus continues to destabilize. It is in part why it can be so difficult to share our faith with others. It seems to threaten, to isolate, and pull on relationships. But here we sit on Christmas Eve knowing, trusting, even if not fully understanding that in this child, in this man, there was a shift in the world, and that shift continues in the lives of those who believe.

The story of the Magi is always joined together with the gifts that they brought for the boy...

Gold to symbolize Jesus' presence as a King.

Incense to symbolize his presence as a deity, as God.

The gift of myrrh symbolized the future suffering that would come upon him.

The sighting of the wise men is an important link between Jesus birth and death.

The Sight of the Baby (no scripture reading)

Reflection

Everything about this Christmas story revolves around the little baby Jesus.

Throughout Advent candles have been lit, each representing the hope, peace, love, and joy wrapped up and put in an animal-feeding tough.

The birth of Jesus is about the incarnation. This is central to our faith. It is how the Christian faith differs from all other religions. Without this our faith falls, with it we are

redeemed. And this is the incarnation, that God through Christ made himself known in full, in a specific way, and personally, by taking on our human nature and coming, in fact living among us as a particular man and without in any way ceasing to be God, eternal and infinite. Jesus was both fully human and fully divine and because of this was able to create for us a relationship with God that had been lost to sin.

This is what we celebrate when we celebrate Christmas. This truth of God's amazing love for us.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

This is Christmas.