

Christmas Eve, 2011

I bought a new Nativity set this year. I had to special order it from a pottery in PA and I was so excited when it finally arrived – just in time for Advent. I took out the wooden stable and then started unwrapping each of the hand-painted figures. I put the Magi aside, waiting for their appearance on Epiphany. I put the baby Jesus aside too, waiting for his debut tonight. But Mary and Joseph took their places in the stable, with the manger and two cows, four sheep (and strangely, two oversized ducks). And that was it! I looked again into the box, thinking that I might have missed the rest of the cast. Where were the shepherds? Where were the angels?

I emailed the pottery to see if they had been overlooked in packing. But alas no, there were no angels or shepherds included with the set. Well OK, I thought. I can live without them; it's still a fine Nativity set. But something was missing. Some important characters were missing.

Angels play a major role in the Christmas story (the cutest parts in the kids' pageant). In Matthew, an angel explains Mary's pregnancy to Joseph, warns him to flee Herod's murderous designs, and tells him when it is safe to return home. Matthew's angels work through dreams to insure the fulfillment of prophecy. In Luke, angels establish the parallel lives of John the Baptist and Jesus. First, the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will have a child named John, who will prepare the way. Next, that same Gabriel tells Mary, that her child will be called the Only Begotten One, and will reign on the throne of his ancestor, the great King David. Finally, when Jesus is born in Bethlehem - ancestral city of David - an angel tells some shepherds: "Don't be afraid; I am bringing you good news of great joy." And then comes the whole horde of angels singing their grand finale.

In the words of John Dominic Crossan, "Angels direct, as it were, the narrative traffic of both those infancy stories." He also urges us to think of angels as 'ultimate meanings radiantly personified.' I'm not exactly sure what that means, but I do know it's something that's spectacular, mystical, jaw-dropping, totally awe-inspiring. And there has to be at least one in every Nativity scene.

Then there are the shepherds. If angels are the 'plum' roles in the Christmas pageant, the shepherds are the ones who do the grunt work. Instead of glittering halos and wings, it usually it means wearing somebody's old bathrobe with a towel draped over your head. It wasn't so great to be a real shepherd either. Shepherds were at the lowest end of the social order. They lived a hardscrabble life and were often accused of being shiftless and untrustworthy – not the kind of people you'd expect to be invited to visit anybody's newborn baby.

But these angels saw fit to make their grand announcement to this group of raggedy shepherders, thereby signaling to us that this story about the 'glory of God in the highest' has something to do with even the most marginalized people of the world. The presence of the angels sanctifies the margins, making them holy places, making the economically and socially marginalized holy persons. So there have to be shepherds in the Nativity scene. They're not just bit players, grunt workers; they symbolize the fact that the spectacular, mystical, jaw-dropping, totally awe-inspiring wonder of incarnation, the presence of the holy can happen anywhere. Maybe not a choir of angels singing over your house. But - if there can be a Divine presence, not only in the so-called 'highest heaven,' but also at the margins, then there can be a Divine presence anywhere and everywhere in-between – even in my life, your life.

And in the life of our world. We forget sometimes how cutting edge and dangerous this story is. The announcement made by the angels in Luke's gospel includes titles that had already been given – to the Roman emperor. Also, peace on earth had already been proclaimed – by the Roman emperor. The vaunted Pax Romana had been put in place by Caesar Augustus, proclaimed 'Son of God,' 'Savior of the World.' So if the Roman emperor had already established peace on earth, what was left for a Jewish peasant baby to do? How was 'peace on earth, good will to all' different from Roman imperial peace?

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The difference, of course, is in the *how* of peace, in the method of its accomplishment. The Roman Empire, like every empire then and now, imposed peace through military victory. But the vision that Jesus would proclaim would be a different program altogether: recognizing that victory's violence establishes not peace but a lull until the next round of war, the messianic vision is peace through justice. This story is as cutting edge and dangerous today as it was then. It has as many implications for our world of war, oppression, political maneuvering, and injustice as it did in the time of Jesus.

This story is also as comforting and inspiring for our own little worlds, our own lives of cares and concerns as it was then. Because the truth is that each one of us has in some way been marked by the everyday hardships of this life – whether it's a personal situation or just keeping up with the news of the day. How many among all those gathered in churches tonight come with fears about a still beleaguered economy? Or a failing relationship? How many come coping with an illness or filled with worry about a loved one serving overseas? How many come stressed by caring for a parent, a spouse, or a child?

We can understand the frailty of the human characters in Luke's story. We feel for them. The genius of it is this portrayal of simple, sympathetic, and everyday characters. And so we wonder, if the Divine Presence can work in and through such ordinary characters, then perhaps this Divine Presence can also work in and through us. The message of Christmas is that this story is for us. If there are angels in the Nativity scene, then we too hear the announcement. And if there are shepherds, then we know that the message is intended for us, for all of us, from the greatest to the least.

The promise of Christmas in a nutshell is that the Holy Presence, the Divine, God, God-dess, the Tao, the Ground of our Being, dwells not only 'out there somewhere,' but also in here - with the lowly, the unexpected, those considered 'nothing' by this world, with you, with me. Luke understood, in writing his version of how Jesus came to be, that it is amid the weakness and vulnerability of human birth and human life – and death - that holiness is found. So if there is only one thing that we hear this Christmas Eve, maybe it is that this story of long ago is not only about angels and shepherds, a mother and her newborn. It is also about us, all of us gathered amid the candles and readings, carols and prayers. And if there is one thing that we take away, it is that the Holy One goes with us – into all the cares, concerns, dangers, and everyday stuff of our everyday lives.

And that is a message we can live with – not just for one silent night, but for always.

Amen

Isaiah 9:2-7

In the midst of exile and tragedy, God presents the unexpected vision of Shalom—of peace and justice. Isaiah presents an “alternative vision” of reality from the world of death, destruction, and injustice that enveloped the Jewish people and that is still characteristic of our time.

It is written . . .

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;

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they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
to us an heir is given;
and the government will be upon the shoulders
of that one whose name will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of that government
and of peace there shall be no end,
upon the throne of David, and over David's kingdom,
to establish it, and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the God of hosts will do this.

Titus 2:11-14

Titus affirms that the realm of salvation includes all humankind. Even when we are oblivious of God's presence, God is still working in our lives, luring us toward wholeness. This is the radical word of grace. The only appropriate response to the ubiquity of divine grace is to live in accordance with God's aim of justice, healing, and transformation.

It is written . . .

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave up self for us that to redeem us from all iniquity and purify for Christ's self a chosen people who are zealous for good deeds.

Luke 2:1-20

Luke's reading speaks of the concreteness of the incarnation. Jesus of Nazareth is not an other-worldly abstraction, but a fully human person, born at a particular time and place and to particular parents. In contrast to the majestic words of John's gospel, Luke's vision of universalism is embedded among the working class, the oppressed, and the impoverished, almost as if to say, "if the incarnation can happen here, it can happen anywhere. If down-and-out shepherds witness the holy birth, why not you?"

It is written . . .

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be
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registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn child, whom she wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of God stood before them, and the glory of God shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"

When 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 God has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The Challenge of Christmas by John Dominic Crossan

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-dominic-crossan/the-challenge-of-christma_b_1129931.html