

Isaiah 9: 2 - 7

Psalms 96

Year B, Feast of the Incarnation

Titus 2: 11 - 14

Luke 2: 1 - 14

December 24, 2008

God With Us

Herding sheep is lonely work. I cannot speak from a level of personal experience but watching animals graze has to be a silent, slow profession. Shepherds spend hours scanning the horizon for any hint of danger or trouble. They must work to keep the sheep from wandering off into danger. As the psalmist wrote, they “lead them beside still waters.” They likely run into other shepherds at watering holes and perhaps grazing in nearby pastures. However, those moments are fleeting in nature. The whole purpose of the job is to keep sheep not company with others. So, they spend days and night living, breathing and eating with their animal charges.

Add to this solitary laundry list of tasks the reality that 1st century society in Palestine looked down on shepherds. Spending long days sleeping in fields and watching animals graze by day does not lead to good hygiene. You could likely smell a shepherd long before you saw one. Thanks to the long, lonely hours of this profession, many shepherds were referred to derisively as hired hands. At the sign of any trouble, they would often run and leave their animals to the wolves or thieves. Rabbis of the era actually taught that shepherds were part of the lowliest and least desirable professions for faithful Jews. The grouping included tax collectors, prostitutes, shepherds, and sailors.¹ Alienated from Second Temple Judaism, working long hours through dark nights, shepherds live a very lonely existence.

¹ This list of undesirables comes from memory of a commentary about shepherds. Sadly, I cannot recall where I read it . . .

Mary and Joseph sound just as lonely and lost. Thanks to a decree from a foreign ruler, they must travel to Bethlehem to be taxed. When April 15 rolls around, just remember that you have nothing to complain about in comparison. Joseph had to take his nine-month-pregnant wife on a week long walk in order to be taxed. The two travel a long and dangerous journey to be told how much they owe to their oppressor. They are obviously alone. They have no family with which to stay. They have no friends, no relatives, no one who knows them. They are alone and left to their own devices with the animals. This theme of aloneness permeates the start of Luke's gospel.

Something about being alone resonates with all of us. We all understand what it means to be left out or lost or to "walk in darkness" as Isaiah says it. My father-in-law, Jim, illustrated this point beautifully several years ago. During the holiday break from seminary one year, Jessie, Jim and I were resting, watching the non-descript bowl game of the day go by. Jessie's mom and sister went to exchange clothes with some friends. When we heard the car drive up, Jim turned to us with a mischievous idea, "Let's start laughing when they come in. They will be so worried about being left out they will go crazy." So, just as the door started to open, we began laughing. Both Jessie's sister and mom started asking, "What's so funny?" Jim replied, "Oh nothing." I am not sure how I would have reacted. My guess is that I would have said, "ok" and then moved on to the next thing. The response drove them crazy. For the next hour or two, Jessie's mom kept asking, "What was so funny?" "What were y'all talking about?" At first, Jessie's sister tried to play it cool, but she eventually gave in and started whisper-question me, "Hey, Bill, just tell me what they were laughing about." Jim laughingly left them off the hook about an hour later. For Jessie, this was all a revelation, "Now I know where I get it!"

To which Jim merely affirmed, “Oh yeah. It would have driven me just as crazy. I hate to be left out of what is going on.”

We all have that worry and fear of being left out and being alone. For each of the major characters in the Gospel of Luke, this feeling of isolation marks where they are. Mary and Joseph are in a strange town completely alone with the animals. The shepherds are alone and isolated among their sheep. For Isaiah, the whole people of Israel have been left alone by God. Their enemies have plotted against them, harassed them, and defeated them. They walk in a darkness of loss and exile. In this context of loss, Isaiah makes his great prophecy for a nation and the world, “the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14) She will bear a son. As he echoes in this evening’s reading, “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us.” (Isaiah 9: 5) Many may ask about this name Immanuel. We translate the rest of the verse into English and leave the name dangling in Hebrew. Christian scholars and theologians have long translated the name to prove the point. Immanuel means “God with us”. So, to hear the prophecy of Isaiah ring true to a world lost in darkness, a world isolated, a world in the exile of sin and decay, a world hurting and alone, we must say, “For a child has been born TO US, a son given TO US, for God is WITH US!” The great light we see in Isaiah is this life coming into the world. God choosing to live among us, choosing to be with us, choosing to love us despite all that has come before and since. The great Alleluia strain is raised because God is with us. Immanuel, God with us! As novelist Taylor Caldwell once said, “this is the message of Christmas: We are never alone.”

Heaven’s great army of angels fills an otherwise empty sky to make the proclamation with joy. The lowliest in society, a group of shepherds, become

the first to hear of God's presence. The angels make the great proclamation of God's presence, "Do not be afraid; for see- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: TO YOU is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Even the Angels make sure to emphasize that this gift of presence, light and life is for US.

A scared and lonely couple is visited by a small, strange group to celebrate. A family is born that will bring light to the world. They begin the story isolated and alone and end those verses with celebration and joy and praise. A child is given to them. A son is born to them. God is brought gently present. The power of this story rests in those broad themes we can all recognize in our bones. We know what it meant to be isolated, alone, and apart. We know, at one point or another, what it means to be left out or ignored. We know and more importantly can feel those hurts and slights and deep loss. The good news is that Jesus comes to bind those wounds. His name alone conveys his promise and presence,: His name means, quite simply, "God saves".

Through this child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger, we find the hope and promise that Isaiah predicted hundreds of years before. Those left apart are reconciled. Those walking in darkness have seen a great light. Those separated from God through sin are brought powerfully home. A child is born TO US, a son is given TO US, indeed, we celebrate tonight because he is born: Immanuel, GOD WITH US- and with God we are never, ever alone.

AMEN.