

THE VERY FIRST CHRISTMAS SERVICE

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Luke 2:8-20

This morning marks the beginning of Advent, that season of the Christian year when our hearts and minds are turned with anticipation toward the birthday of our King. These next few weeks will be filled with numerous opportunities to worship at the crib side of Jesus. Churches will be decorated with holly green and poinsettia red. Lamp posts will take on a festive air. Many shop windows will herald the coming of the Christ child with manger scene and lilting Christmas Carol's.

But with all of its loveliness and beauty there will be those who breathe a sigh of relief when it's over and say, "Thank goodness, Christmas, but once a year." To them, "Silent Night, Holy Night" no longer expresses the spirit of Christmas. Rather, they find the more accurate description in Yorgy Jorgenson's "yumping" ballad, "I Yust Go Nuts At Christmas."

Alton F. Davis, vice president of Lincoln Electric Company, describes it pretty well when he says:

"Christmas has become a series of mad rushes, each rush fumbling into the next, and leaving us little or no time to consider why we exchange presents or to spare a thought for the One whose birthday we really celebrate."

I thought this morning we could get a head start on the hustle and bustle which threatens to overshadow the real meaning of Christmas, by climbing aboard the magic carpet of our imagination and journey back across the centuries to share in the very first Christmas service ever held. It is recorded for us by Dr. Luke in the second chapter of his gospel (Lk 2:8-20).

The Church

As Dr. Luke explains, the very first Christmas service did not take place in a typical church. In

fact, it wasn't held in a church at all. Instead of Gothic arches and stained glass windows there was a midnight sky from which "silver winters stars hung still and white."

Instead of plush-lined theater seats or even hard, straight-back walnut pews, the congregation sat huddled on the rugged rocks which lined a wind swept field. The choir loft was a low hanging cloud and the pulpit was a hillside made bright by the light of one great star.

No, this very first Christmas service was not held in a church at all, but in an open field. And yet, I think you will agree it was the most hauntingly beautiful worship center ever used by man.

And, interestingly enough, this cathedral of the wide open spaces became a favorite preaching place of Jesus in later years. Again and again we find him standing on a hillside. By the sea shore. In an open field. Oh, he taught and preached in synagogues too, but there was something about the open sky, a gentle breeze, a pointed mountain peak which moved Jesus to deliver some of his most inspired words.

And we can understand why, can't we? For we, too, have experienced exalted moments of the soul in that great outdoor Cathedral built by the hand of God. And while we are grateful for magnificent sanctuaries and churches of all sizes and shapes where we can meet to worship God, I think all of us could attest to the fact that some of the most intimate moments we have known with God have not been in church at all... but out there under the stars... at a summer camp service... or quite possibly in the quiet of our own living room.

As Harold Blake Walker points out,

"Coming close to Christ is not a matter of geography. One cannot imagine a less promising place for an encounter with God than a barren, rugged field outside the little town of Bethlehem in Judea. But great moments of the soul can happen any place where God lets his ladder down."

That can happen on a subway train or in an elevator car. In a jail cell or executive suite. In a palatial mansion or a tenement apartment heated with a pot bellied stove.

God cannot be confined to the four walls of even the most aesthetically beautiful building. He reveals himself whenever and wherever people feel a sense of need, even as the shepherds did as they sat huddled on the stony soil of an open field outside Bethlehem.

The Congregation

But, if the meeting place for the very first Christmas service was unusual, so, too, were the people. The congregation God selected to share in this momentous occasion did not consist of the intellectually wise. The socially elite. Or the economically secure. It was made up of the most common of common people. Humble, illiterate, poverty stricken shepherds.

Normally “tidings of great joy” would be heard in the Palace of Herod. Where there would have been music and dancing. Gaiety and laughter. But no, God made his Great Announcement to a motely band of lowly shepherds.

Perhaps he wanted those common people to know how *uncommon* they are – *to him*! Perhaps he wanted these who had so little of life’s goods to be the first to receive the Greatest Treasure ever given to mankind. Perhaps he wanted to prove again the truth of the saying:

“God uses the foolishness of men to confound the wise.”

Have you ever noticed that the very people who have a gruff, seemingly rough exterior, often hide a gentle heart beneath that protective crust? And, on the other hand, have you *also* noticed that outwardly genteel, sophisticated people are often as cold as steel and hard as nails inside?

The Bible says that while man looks at the outward appearance God looks at the heart. And apparently, based upon what he saw there, God by-passed Herod’s palace with its gaiety and

grandeur, and chose shepherds for the congregation of the very first Christmas service. He knew that while they were gruff and coarse, they were willing to listen and to learn about his incredible love for people. All kinds of people. Everywhere.

The Choir and the Anthem

And then there was the choir. We're proud of the music in our church, but I'm afraid even *our* choir would have to take a back seat to the choir rendering special music at that very first Christmas service. It was made up of a multitude of the heavenly host and they filled the air with an anthem of praise to God such as mankind has never heard before or since.

“Long years ago o’er Bethlehem’s hill
was seen a wondrous thing;
as shepherds watched their sleeping flocks
they heard the angels sing.
The anthem rolled above the clouds
when earth was hushed and still;
its notes proclaimed sweet peace on earth
to all mankind, good will.”

Yes, that was some choir! A choir of angelic voices blending together in one great oratorio of praise which rolls down the centuries and echoes in our hearts:

“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

The Preacher and His Text

And the preacher was pretty special, too. Luke describes him as:

“An angel of the Lord.”

There have been many mighty men of God who have climbed their pulpit stairs to proclaim the truth that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. There have been many silver tongued orators, and radiant, effervescent spell binders who have held audiences in a trance as they told the old, old story that is ever new. But there never was a preacher like this one. For

here was a messenger from the every throne of God, his lips aflame with a coal from the altar on high.

And what a sermon! What a text!

“Fear not; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior which is Christ the Lord.”

And there, my friend, is the real meaning of Christmas. Not the tinsel and the toys. The sleighbells and the snow. The holly wreath and mistletoe. For Christmas without all of these trimmings would still be the day on which our Savior was born.

Christmas is not for kids! Christmas is for adults who know both the need for and the cost of forgiveness. As Frank H. Keith so beautifully puts it:

“We who are earthbound should turn from our dreams
to think for a time what this day really means!
And we who are blinded by gifts of the floor
must be reminded that Christmas is more
than the gleam of an ornament heliotrope.
For this is the day when our God gave us -- hope!”

An angel for the preacher! With hope and peace for his text! What more could any congregation want?

The Results

And what were the results of this very first Christmas service? No one ever really knows what happens to people on Sunday as they sit in church. Or as they commune with God in some quiet place. But on this occasion Dr. Luke took pains to tell us what happened the shepherds as a result of their encounter with God. First of all --

They Found Jesus.

The scripture says, “They came with haste and found the babe lying in a manger.”

No preacher could pray for more than that! No preacher could hope for more than that his hearers would find Christ. For when they find him, they have found God’s Inexpressible Gift.

Walter A. Maier writes, “Among the most valuable paintings in all the art galleries of the world is Raphael’s glorification of the Christ child and his mother. Five million dollars could not buy this painting. But if you receive God’s Christmas gift and have the beauty of Jesus imprinted on your heart, you have a blessing that makes five million dollars seem paltry.

“One of the most costly pieces of property in the world is the site of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. No amount of money could purchase this reputed spot of our Savior’s birth. Streams of blood have flown from 10,000 wounds, as many have tried to seize this place. Yet, if you have God’s Christmas gift and kneel in spirit at the Christ child’s manger -- even though you are out of work, out funds, out of supplies -- you are richer than if you held title to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. For when Christ is born in your heart, you have the blessed assurance that all is well with your soul -- a treasure no amount of money can buy.”

And thank God, the congregation attending that very first Christmas service found Jesus. But something else happened, too.

They Shared What They Had Found With Others.

Look at our text: “They made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.”

There are some people who look upon their salvation as a new Christmas toy which they want

people to admire but not touch. They cling to it and protect it. It is so precious to them they would never think of talking about it. As a result, there is a sense in which they lose it.

Many years ago a six-year-old boy was sitting on his father's lap on Christmas Eve, looking at the Christmas tree. He had been permitted to stay up until the unheard of hour of 9:00 on this special occasion. As his bedtime passed, his head began to nod, his eyes grew heavy and then, as if on signal, he dropped off to sleep and dreamed a dream.

In his dream an angel came down from heaven, and starting at the bottom of the beautiful Christmas tree the angel snuffed out every candle until he came to the one at the top. *That* candle the angel carried over to the little boy. Handing it to him, the angel said,

“Here is the candle of Christmas light and love. Don't let it go out!”

The little boy stirred uneasily in his daddy's lap and muttered something aloud about candles on a trees and an angel.

The father took his wee lad up to bed and tucked him in. Just before he turned to go, he leaned over and kissed the boy good night. As he started to straighten up, the boy aroused, put his arms around his daddy, hugged him tight and whispered,

“Daddy, don't let the candle go out.”

Beloved, the hope of the world lies in that small child's Christmas dream. For the Bible says,

“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father which is in heaven.”

But what good is a light if it's allowed to go out? What good is a candle if it's hid beneath a bushel basket?

One of the reasons our world is staggering through an oppressive darkness is that the people who have seen a Great Light have been unwilling to share it. But, thank God the congregation attending that very first Christmas service took the fragile, flickering flame which had been placed in their hands, and used it to ignite a mighty conflagration which swept into the

darkened souls of people and gave them light and life.

Finally, when the congregation went back to their routine tasks --

They Carried with Them a Sense of Joy.

“And the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen.”

Maybe that’s what a child inadvertently suggested when he went out at the end of January to sing Christmas Carols. One of his neighbors, listening to the strains of “Hark The Herald Angels Sing” opened his front door and asked, “Don’t you know Christmas was a month ago, sonny?” “Yes, sir,” said the pale little singer, “But I had measles then and couldn’t go caroling.”

The joy of Christmas is not confined to one day. One week. Or even one season. It is caroling time anytime if we have seen what the shepherds saw. If we have heard what the shepherds heard. If we have known what the shepherds knew:

“Peace on earth.” “Fear not.” Tidings of great joy.” “A Savior is born.”

Yes, that must have been some meeting -- that very first Christmas service – don’t you agree? An open field for a church. A group of poor shepherds for a congregation. An angelic chorus singing an oratorio of “Glory to God.” An angel for a preacher, with hope and peace for his theme. What a service that must have been!

But when you stop to think about it, it isn’t so unusual after all. God still “lets his ladder down” wherever people have an open mind and a hungry heart. Christ still is the friend of sinners. Choirs still raise anthems of praise to God. Preachers still proclaim the Christmas gospel of hope and peace life through a Savior born in Bethlehem.

And the results which were obtained that night can be realized again. They can actually happen this morning. In this church. Right where you sit.

You, too, can find Christ if, like the shepherds, you are willing to seek him.

You, too, can share Christ if, like the shepherds, you are willing to tell folks you meet, that Christ has been born in your heart.

You, too, can add meaning to the routine process of living if, like the shepherds, you go back to your humdrum tedious tasks with a happy heart, and joy-filled countenance glorifying and praising God for all the things you have seen and heard.

The very first Christmas service! What a service that must have been. But you know? What happened then, can happen again, right now, if you only give God a chance. How about it? Will you let Christmas happen to you? Right now?