

December 16, 2018 How Very Common Luke 2:8-20

We find it easy to lose sight of the very common quality of the Christmas story. What I am trying to say is this: the birth of Jesus was not front page news. It would not have made the 6:00 o'clock news and it certainly would not have been a story you would have seen on the National had television existed at the time. It was too common. No Psazz. No one with rock star status was involved, it was not even a good enough scandal to excite world wide interest. It was a yawner. A so what yarn.

We lose sight of that because Christmas is big in our culture. It is big in Bethlehem in the world of 2018! I will guarantee you that on the eve of the 24th of this month there will be footage from Bethlehem square, outside the church, built on the spot where tradition says, Jesus was born. The pilgrims will be the story. People who will have travelled from all over the world to spend Christmas at ground zero. And I want you to remember this: it is not because the Church has said, Bethlehem square marks the spot. By tradition, I am referring to the fact that Jews have passed down the word from the time of Jesus birth, "that's the place." Or at least a little cave down in the basement of that church....is the spot.

Christmas is important. It is big business. Stores will continue to operate based on December sales, or they will close. If sales are poor, there will probably be a recession in the coming year. Jobs will dry up. The numbers of those using food

banks will increase. The sale of homes and cars...the big ticket items will slump and the economy will go from bad to worse. The bean counters are already trolling through business performance, to try and get a head start on the outcome of the annual Christmas effect. It is easy to lose sight of Jesus...because there is so much more at stake...in the view of the world, in the view of the nations.

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is not about the Empire of Rome. In its list of stars, ranking surprisingly high are the shepherds who were working the night shift on the hills that surround Bethlehem. They were pretty common. They were poor. They had little status. They were not people you would find written up in history books. Luke for all his care and concern to include them, does not tell us even one of their names. They are just a crowd of workers, watching, tending, feeding, assisting in the lambing process, fending off predators, and trying in the process themselves, to survive. How very common.

I thought of a modern equivalent. The bank in which I lodge my business for example. My pension cheque arrives there by e-deposit. I carry in my pay cheque and add it to the chequing account. My goal is very simple. Make it to the point where the new income deposits allow the wheels of commerce to continue to turn. I pay most of my bills in the bank. Because I am not very good on a computer, the teller accepts my bills and sends the payments out by her computer.

And while I might know her first name, I never know her last, or where she lives. Or anything else about her. There is a portrait of the branch manager on the wall and it tells you who he is “full name”. The tellers do the work, face the public and are as anonymous as can be....they are just workers.

So were the shepherds. They lived out in the fields on the hills. And they kept watch over their flocks at night. Night time was important. It is at night that the predators come. It is at night time they have to fend off the wolves, the bears, the lions. Darkness works for the hunters. Sheep are easy prey. Shepherds are the security guards of their time. And they are still at it, sitting on the box rails of their Ford trucks...watching. When I was younger I thought of them as wealthy ranchers, watching “their” flocks! Not so. Sheep are wealth. Shepherds are the bank tellers of the livestock trade. They are just workers. They are not people with great status. In fact their native religion looks down on them...perpetually unclean, because of their work. Unwelcome at synagogues, the Temple, or in “society”.

Every part of the Gospels reminds us that God is at work and HE sees things, HE sees people, differently than we do. So the shepherds are working the night shift. It is cold so the warmth of the fire at the camp site is really tempting, but you cannot watch the flocks and hang out where it is warmer, you can't do the work and drink a lot of coffee. So they are where the sheep are. It is surrounded by the darkness of a

winter's night, cold and exposed, that an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. The experience was not just abnormal...it was terrifying. That's what Luke learned about what we call Christmas Eve, as he worked his sources. They were terrified by this heavenly visitor and the experience that exploded upon them.

But it was not just a frightening experience. The angel spoke to them. Reassured them, bid them not to be afraid! Invited them to listen... "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." Yes this news is intended for you as much as anyone else, as much as the owners of the sheep you tend, the Lord is aware of you, HE sends you the message, the joy and the hope contained in HIS love. It matters to the Lord that you be among the first to hear the news... "Today in the city of David, a Saviour has been born to you; HE is Christ the Lord." Messiah, the Anointed One, Your Saviour! "A Saviour,...born to you....the gift is given...to you...Christ the Lord: the Promised One of God,,,to you"

I mean, they are just shepherds! They are so very common. And as you read Luke here you can almost read the mind of the angel. "I've given you the good news. But you are going to want proof aren't you. And proof you must have because this is good news and it is meant for you. So, "this will be the sign, the proof, the word I bring can be trusted. You will find a baby, wrapped in cloths (I really like the word swaddled) and lying in a manger." And suddenly there is not just one

angel, there is a great company of them, and they join the one who brought the news....and they are not just there....visible and tangible... they burst into song... “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, to men on whom his favour rests.”

That last bit was so obvious to the shepherds, I mean, there are no people from the management consortium out here on the hills. The only people here are shepherds. Common, ordinary shepherds. It is to them the angel came and spoke. It is before them the angels appeared and sang and blessed....these shepherds, these common shepherds.

And they did what common folk do. They want proof. So when the show is over, the song has been sung, the blessing has been given, they talk it over, probably they took a vote, maybe they left some behind...maybe they went in shifts. Don't you think they would all want to see? They made their decision. They made it fast, and they hurried to Bethlehem. And they found Mary and Joseph, and the baby. The baby Jesus was wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in the manger. A crowd had apparently gathered. And the shepherds told them what had happened out on the hills, and what the angels had said about “this child.” They shared the word they had received. And people were amazed. That's what people remembered. They were amazed! In fact there were a number of reactions. People in general were amazed. Mary on the other hand “treasured these things in her heart.” She has had experience

with angels. She knows her story. She knows Joseph's story. In fact she knows about cousin Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, and Zachariah, the priest who was Elizabeth's husband and John's father. And now these shepherds. And Mary thought about these things. It's not just that she has memories. One of the roots of the word ponder means, matters of weight. She is already looking for other things because the birth of this baby, Jesus, is obviously...important, she knows it is "heavy stuff".

But the final word has to be about shepherds, very common, Bethlehem shepherds. They did not quit their day jobs. In fact what they did is they went back to work. But what a different journey. Revival has broken out among them. They are praising God for what they have seen. A baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger. (You'd think it was Christmas!) And best of all....it was just as they had been told by the angel. God's revelation is dependable....For people with a measure of faith: how very common.

Let us pray;

Lord Jesus we thank YOU for YOUR word, for it's dependability, it's faith building, nurturing quality. We thank YOU that Luke did his homework when he decided to write this precious Gospel. We thank YOU for leading him to the sources that permit his giving us insight into Mary and Joseph, and the baby, and the manger, shepherds whom YOU love, and the message that YOU are a Saviour for all the people, including us. We offer praise to YOU and YOUR name. Amen