

Christmas 1: Holy Trinity Church: January 1, 2016

The Feast of the Holy Name: Luke 2: 15-21: *Christmas, The Heart of Love*

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to begin with a story. It's not a Christmas story. But it involves an incident that occurred on the day after Christmas in 2004.

Just before Christmas, seventeen-year-old Max Loeb was home from school.

He had been suspended that day for some reason. It was nothing serious. His family, though, is grateful that this one time Max got in trouble. Why?

Because on that particular day, his father also happened to be home, and his father, Hamilton Loeb, suffered a massive heart attack. Max performed CPR on his father, keeping him alive until paramedics arrived. At the hospital, doctors discovered that Hamilton Loeb was suffering from a viral infection in his heart. After repeated heart attacks, the doctors decided to put him in a deep coma in order to protect his brain from any damage. He came out of the coma the day after Christmas, and went on to recover from the heart

infection. Now, here is what is interesting. Not only can the Loeb family be thankful that Max was suspended from school that day, but, believe it or not, they can also be thankful that Dad had his heart attack. Why? If Hamilton Loeb had not suffered his heart attack, his family would have been on vacation at that time. They had their plane tickets. Their bags were packed. If Hamilton had not had his heart attack, they would have been catching a tan on the sunny beaches of Phuket, Thailand at the very time that same beach was being devastated by the tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands of people on the day after Christmas in 2004.

Timing is everything. It was for the Loeb family. A suspension from school allowed Dad to survive a heart attack which may have actually saved the lives of the entire family. Have you heard people explain their good fortune like this: I was just in the right place at the right time. It was nothing I did. Some people would say it was just blind dumb luck.

Those shepherds from long ago who found their way to the stable in Bethlehem on the night Christ was born would certainly explain their good fortune that way; talk about timing. They were shepherds on a hillside. They were minding their own business, watching their sheep. They were vigilant. They were alert and they were always prepared in case a wild animal attacked their sheep. Suddenly, they were startled by the swish of an angel's wing. It's

a beautiful story, but why them? Of all people the angels could have invited to celebrate the first Christmas, why shepherds? Why them?

In the French hilltop village of Les Beaux in Provence, a Christmas procession takes place each year that is unlike any other. Shepherds, not pageant actors, but genuine shepherds climb the steep roads into the village. They are sun-darkened, rough-looking men in heavy wool cloaks. They process into the Church at midnight, the villagers are silent with respect, and the children stare with amazement. The last shepherd to enter carries a lamb from his flock and places it in the arms of the priest and the service begins. How could we celebrate Christmas without shepherds? And yet, that does not answer the question. Why shepherds? Did they just happen to be in the right place at the right. Is it just plain old dumb luck? Or, is God trying to say something to us in giving shepherds such prominence in the Christmas story. Maybe, by including shepherds, God is telling us that the gospel is for all people. Don't you all think that is just the sort of thing God would do? The gospel isn't just for the politically connected or the moneyed elite. The shepherds had no power or wealth. They were at the very bottom of society. Their hygiene wasn't all that great. Neither were their manners. They certainly weren't among the religiously elite. In fact religious people looked down on them. Theologian William Barclay tells us that shepherds were despised by the

orthodox good people of the day. Shepherds were quite unable to keep the kosher ceremonial law; they could not observe all the meticulous hand washings and rules and regulations. Their flocks made far too many constant demands on them for that, and so the orthodox looked down on them as very common people.

But isn't that just like God? A pregnant betrothed unwed teenager, her husband, a group of shepherds coming into town to see if this fantastic story told by the angels could possibly be true. An innkeeper who consigns a woman "great with child" to a stable out back with cows and perhaps sheep, if the shepherds couldn't leave them alone on the hillside, they brought them along. Finding no other place to lay their child, the humble couple makes a crib out of which the cows fed. Matthew's story may be of wise men bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh, but Luke's telling the same story and that story is about mud and manure and social rejects. And that my sisters and brothers is Luke's very real Christmas. It's about people who are on the outside looking in. In fact, this is how Jesus summed up his own ministry in his message to John the Baptist sitting in Herod's prison: *"The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them."*

When you go to the mall and you gaze one last time on all the glitter of the

Christmas season and you marvel at all the conspicuous consumption, and you see all the beautiful people cashing in their gift certificates to get nice presents, or exchanging ones that didn't quite fit, remember this is not the heart of Christmas. This is not it! Christmas, my sisters and brothers, is God reaching down to all the heartbroken and desperate people in our world. The refugees in drought-stricken third-world countries, drug-ruined kids in prison cells at the Juvenile Detention Center in Cranston, cancer sufferers feeling their strength seeping away, hospice patients who know this is their last Christmas on this earth. I don't want to bring you down on this Feast of the Holy Name on the first Day of the New Year, not at all. In fact, I want to lift you up, to God's view of Christmas. Christmas is good news, most of all, for those who do not have much else to hold on to.

I found a story that former Georgia Senator Sam Nunn used to tell. A reporter was covering the tragic conflict in Sarajevo a few years back. He saw a little girl shot by a sniper. The reporter threw down his pad and pencil and stopped being a reporter for a few minutes. He rushed to the man who was holding the child, and helped them both into his car. As the reporter stepped on the accelerator, racing to the hospital, the man holding the bleeding child said, "Hurry, my friend, my child is still alive." A moment or two later he said again, "Hurry, my friend, my child is still breathing." A moment later he said

with more urgency, “Hurry, my friend, my child is still warm.” Finally he said, “Hurry. Oh, my God, my child is getting cold.” When they reached the hospital, the little girl had died. As the two men were in the lavatory, washing the blood off their hands and their clothes, the man turned to the reporter and said, “This is a terrible task for me. I must go and tell her father that his child is dead. He will be heartbroken.” The reporter was amazed. He looked at the grieving man and said, “I thought she was your child.” The man looked back and said, “No, but aren’t they all our children?”

My brothers and sisters in Christ, I can tell you this with great certainty:

They are all God’s children. Why the shepherds? Maybe this is God’s way of saying the Gospel is for all God’s people. You can’t earn it. You can’t deserve it. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done or how much you have or have not. The Gospel is good news for all who receive it. It’s the message of acceptance and grace and unimaginable love.

The story of the shepherds is part of the mystery of God. Who can understand God’s ways? First Century Palestine of all places was a small, rebellious conclave in the vast Roman Empire. Joseph was a carpenter by trade and his betrothed Mary are making their way to Bethlehem. Good people, but otherwise unremarkable people. And what about those smelly, crude shepherds, but isn’t that life?

A young man is sent home from school and rescues his father from a massive heart attack. This causes his family to miss their vacation trip to Thailand which is hit with a massive and tragic freak of nature. Who can understand it? People use words like blind dumb luck and coincidences. I believe in neither. Those are just words that fill in the unexplainable. Those words are best left at the door of a casino. There is no understanding to life. We are all aware of this. When we are young and things are going your way, we think we have it all figured out, but all we have to do is just wait and life will take a twist, a dip, a sudden turn and our world is turned upside down. That is life. There is no understanding life. There is only faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love, the love of Christmas; the unconditional, the uncompromising, the unstoppable love of the Incarnation at Christmas. On December 26, 2004, Patty and Bob North received the news that their daughter, Libby, had been seriously injured by that same devastating tsunami that Max Loeb's family had avoided. For days, the Norths were unable to locate the hospital where Libby was receiving treatment. Their situation would have been nearly unbearable had it not been for the kindness of strangers. First, the Norths learned that Libby had been rescued by three Thai men who dug her out from under her collapsed bungalow. A young American woman whose father was in the same hospital as Libby called the

Norths and kept them updated with e-mails until they arrived in Thailand. A local hotel let the Norths stay for free. Americans, Europeans, and Thai people worked together to take care of the wounded and to reunite families that had been separated. During a stressful time, the Norths found many reasons for gratitude. As Patty comments, “If you ever feel like the world’s going to hell, it isn’t. You can find love in total strangers.” And that my brothers and sisters is the very heart of Christmas: love, acceptance, Grace. It doesn’t matter who you are. You can live in a palace or you can be a lowly shepherd on a Judean hillside. God’s love is for you. So, give thanks this day for the heart of Christmas. Our challenge during this New Year 2017 is to open your hearts wide to the love of Christ and let Christ be born in your hearts at Christmas and throughout the year. In everything you do spread that Christmas love to everyone you meet and then they will see the face of Jesus in you, and then they will hear the voice of Jesus in and, and then all whom you meet will be drawn into the everlasting love of Jesus... by you. Amen.