

Christmas Eve 10 PM & Christmas Day 10 AM: Holy Trinity Church:

December 24 & 25, 2017

Luke 2: 1-12: *Seeing Christmas with Gospel Eyes*

Preached

By

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

There is a beautiful and ancient Christmas legend that tells of how God called the angels of heaven together one day for a special choir rehearsal. He told them that he had a special song that he wanted them to learn; a song that they would sing at a very significant occasion. The angels went to work on it. They rehearsed long and hard and with great focus and intensity. In fact, some of the angels grumbled a bit but God insisted on a very high standard for his choir.

As time passed, the choir improved in tone, in rhythm, and in quality. Finally God announced that they were ready but then, he shocked them a bit. He told them that they would sing the song only once and only on one night. There would be just one performance of this great song they had worked on so

diligently. Again, some of the angels grumbled. The song was so extraordinarily beautiful and they had it down pat now, surely they could sing it many, many times. God only smiled and told them that when the time came, they would understand.

Then one night, God called them together. He gathered them above a field just outside of Bethlehem. "It's time," God said to them and the angels sang their song. "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good will toward all people." And as the angels sang, they knew there would never be another night like this one, and that there would never be another birth like this birth in Bethlehem.

When the angels returned to heaven, God reminded them that they would not formally sing that song again as an angelic choir, but if they wanted to, they could hum the song occasionally as individuals. One angel was bold enough to step forward and ask God why. Why could they not sing that majestic anthem again? They did it so well. It felt so right. Why couldn't they sing that great song anymore? "Because," God explained, "my son has been born and now earth must do the singing!"

Once each year, Christmas comes around again to remind us of that God's Son has come to earth and now we must do the singing! And look at how we have tried. Without question, one of the best and most beloved parts of the

celebration of Christmas is the music! The good news of Christmas is so awesome, so full of wonder, that it's not enough to just talk about it. We have to burst forth in song. We have to sing it.

Have you ever wondered how you would have reacted to the angel's message if you were one of the shepherd boys? I have wondered what I would have heard that night had I been there on that cold dark Judean hillside watching over my sheep. It is a question that haunts me. Would I have heard the choirs of angels singing or simply the sounds of barnyard animals? Would I have seen the star in the sky that night or simply two poor and very frightened kids and a donkey? Would I have understood the hushed silence of the divine presence, or simply the chill of a cold east wind? Would I have understood the message of Emmanuel, God is with us, or would the cosmic implications of that evening have simply passed me by?

I am convinced that had two people been there that night in Bethlehem it is quite possible that they could have heard and seen two entirely different scenes. I believe this because all of life is this way. God never presents God's self to us in such a way that we are forced to believe. We are always left with a choice, for that is God's way. So, one person can say "It is a miracle, while another says "It is simply a coincidence."

Certainly very few people in Palestine saw and heard and understood what

took place that night. The choirs of angels singing were drowned out by the haggling and trading going on in the Jerusalem marketplaces. There was a bright star in the sky but the only ones to pay any attention to it were a few astrologers from the East. If anyone did see Mary and Joseph on that most fateful night, they were too preoccupied with their own problems to offer them any assistance.

In one of the All in the Family episodes that aired some years ago Edith and Archie are attending Edith's high school class reunion. Edith encounters an old classmate by the name of Buck who, unlike his earlier days had now become excessively obese. Edith and Buck have a delightful conversation about old times and the things that they did together, but remarkably Edith doesn't seem to notice how extremely heavy Buck had become. Later, when Edith and Archie are talking, she says in her whiny voice "Archie, ain't Buck a beautiful person." Archie looks at her with a disgusted expression and says: "You're a pip, Edith. You know that. You and I look at the same guy and you see a beautiful person and I see a big fat blimp. Edith gets a puzzled expression on her face and says something so unknowingly profound, "Yeah, ain't it too bad, Archie." What we see and what we hear in life depends not upon the events but rather who we are as people. It's not what is out there but it is all about what is inside of us.

Many of you have seen again this year Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." There is one scene that has always fascinated me. Christmas Past has just paid a very discomfoting visit to Ebenezer Scrooge. Clearly the old miser is shaken by the entire ordeal. But, when he awakes from his sleep, does he take the message to heart? No, he simply dismisses it by saying: "Bah, humbug! It wasn't real. Just a bit of last night's undigested beef." A vision to be taken to heart or simple indigestion? You tell me.

Oh, so you say, had I been there at Bethlehem that night I would have seen. I would have understood. I would have been in that stable. Would you? What would you see? There is one way of knowing. Ask yourself, what did I see this Advent Season as I prepared for the birth of the Christ child? When you watched the national news did you see chaos and strife in our country, or did you see sheep without a Shepherd? When you went out to do your shopping did you see only hordes of people in the stores buying stuff they cannot afford or did you notice the worried expressions on their faces? Worried because they are facing this Christmas without employment and they don't know how they are going to make ends meet when the bills of January come in the mail. And ask yourself what you heard this Christmas? Did you hear only the blasts of music and carols, or did you hear the silent sighs of the lonely and the bereaved who may be dreading Christmas because it only accentuates their

loneliness and sadness? And in the midst of the sounds of blaring car horns and people arguing over parking places in mall parking lots, did you hear the faint sounds of laughter that will come this Christmas morning from the poor in our communities and the abused women and children living in Lucy's Hearth because you bought a toy, or a warm sweater or a coat or food for those who have nothing and are homeless. You see, so often what we see and what we hear is not dependent upon the event but upon ourselves and what is going on in our hearts. If you did in fact hear the cry from the lonely and the laughter of poor children, if you saw the sheep without a shepherd, if you saw the terror in an abused woman's eyes, then you might just have seen the events that took place in Bethlehem that night because you would have seen Christmas through Gospel eyes, through the eyes of Jesus.

Recently, I was in a department store doing some Christmas shopping. Christmas music was playing and I was getting into the spirit of it all when suddenly I realized that I was humming along with Natalie Cole. The song is called "My Grown-up Christmas List." Have you heard this? In the song, Natalie Cole reminisces about how when she was young, she sat on Santa's knee and she told him about her childhood fantasies. And then she sings about how she's all grown up now, but she still has dreams of things she would like for Christmas, not just for herself but for our needy world. Then she sings her

"Grown-up Christmas List." Here are the things she wants for Christmas now:

"Lives that won't be torn apart

And wars will never start,

And time will heal the heart.

Everyone will have a friend

And right will always win,

And love will never end.

This (she sings) is my lifelong dream,

My Grown-up Christmas List."

Do you know what Natalie Cole is longing for in that song? She is longing for the peace of Christmas and the place to find that is in the miracle of

Bethlehem. When we go back to Bethlehem, we discover that real peace

means being set right in all our relationships. It means being right with God,

right with ourselves, and right with other people. In the end perhaps one of

our carols words it best: No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin.

Where meek souls shall receive him still, the dear Christ child enters in.

My dearest sisters and brothers in Christ, my Christmas prayer for you is

that God blesses you with Gospel eyes, so that all who meet you will see the

**face of Jesus, hear the voice of Jesus and be drawn into the everlasting love of
Jesus. Amen.**