

What the Watchtower Saw *Luke 2:1-20*

All the waiting and wondering was finally finished. It began when a fierce, fiery angel set a watch at Eden's gate, when Adam and his wife plodded off into a world of sweat and sorrow, of weeds and work, and darkness descended upon the hearts of men.

From that moment on, every spiritual sense strained forward. Someday, God's people prayed, a Deliverer will come. Sometime, a Savior will shatter our chains, and we will be finally and forever free.

Abraham dared to believe God's promise of it. Moses foretold it. David dreamed of it. And prophets described it in exquisite detail.

When that glorious day dawned, Joseph and Mary were setting out from Jericho. Through grit and glare, they climbed the steep mountain road that snaked past canyons and crevices through the Judean desert.

The sun was a flaming orange ball, suspended over the western ridge when the young couple walked out of Jerusalem's south gate. Twilight faded from green to gold to gray. And still they plodded on toward Bethlehem.

Sometime that evening, they passed the lichen covered stones of an ancient landmark the Jews called Migdal Eder, the shepherd's watchtower. Old Rabbis wrote that those weathered stones would see the coming of the Messiah.

And so they did. In the last light of that glorious day, Joseph and Mary plodded past the old tower. The stones looked down upon Mary's swollen stomach. They heard her soft moans at each jarring clod of the donkey's hooves.

And the night wind sighed through the stones. No more waiting. The Messiah was coming. And Migdal Eder saw it.

The Savior

Nazareth was a sleepy pit stop for plodding donkeys. So the people were used to the sound of wooden wheels rattling over the cobbled streets. But when a chariot rumbled to a stop in the market place, the people crowded around.

A soldier stepped out and tacked a parchment poster to a wall. Caesar Augustus commanded that a census be taken. Joseph pushed his way through the crowd to read the words.

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Verses 1-3

Everyone was to return to the town where the old leather scrolls of his family records were kept. Joseph shook his head, and a knot of worry lumped his throat.

Mary was in the last month of her pregnancy. Travel would be difficult and dangerous for her now. But they had no choice. Caesar had decreed it.

In marble halls with brilliant mosaics on the walls, the Roman ruler had signed the order. He thought it was his own idea. But it was not.

It was not really his idea at all. It was God's. The Lord of all creation turned the entire Roman Empire on its ear. And all for one reason.

He wanted one young couple to travel south to Bethlehem. He even ordained the time. Mary must be there when the baby was born.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. Verse 4

Luke's Greek grammar makes it plain that Mary was also a descendant of David. So Joseph could not leave her behind. Even though she was about to give birth, she had to make the journey.

God would not allow His Son to be born anywhere but Bethlehem. After all, Jesus was not only the Son of David who was ordained to be a king. He was and ever shall be the King of kings and Lord of lords.

The very fullness of all the earth was His and His alone. So it is strange to read what happened when Joseph finally pulled the donkey up the hill to Bethlehem.

It was a small town. So there was but one stopover for travelers: a khan, an inn guarded by a high wooden fence. Inside, there was a low building with a cedar post porch. Inside were small rooms.

But Joseph and Mary were not to get so much as a glimpse of them. When Joseph rattled the gate with his fist, a sleepy-eyed innkeeper appeared.

"No," he growled, "there's no room. Not even in the courtyard."

...there was no room for them in the inn. Verse 7

In the end, Mary gave birth alone in a barn that smelled of must and manure. Then she tied off the baby's umbilical cord and wrapped Him in strips of torn rags. All alone.

That much we know. We commemorate it with yard ornaments and nativity sets arranged on the mantle.

But why? That is the question. Why was there no room at the inn for King of all creation? And why is there no room for Him in our hearts and lives?

The answer is obvious. There was no room at the inn because it was already full. And there is no room for Jesus in our hearts because they are already full, too.

But surely the innkeeper could have made room if he wanted to. He could have evicted some of the people who had already settled down for the night.

Or he could have chosen to sleep in the barn himself. Then Jesus would have been born on clean sheets in a warm bedroom.

But that would have required some sacrifice. No, there was no room at the inn because the keeper would not make room for Jesus.

That is also why Jesus finds no room in our lives. It is not that space in our aspirations and affections is limited. It is not even that our hearts and minds are already occupied with other pursuits and pleasures.

The problem is that we will not discard some of our self-centered attitudes. We will not make room for Jesus.

So He cannot bloom and blossom in our lives.

The Singers

Joseph finally found space in a stable. Carved back beneath a limestone ledge, it was out of the chill of the night wind. And it was warmed by the bodies of donkeys and cattle.

There, Mary writhed and moaned on a bed of straw as labor pains swept over her. Meanwhile outside of town, the baby's Father was about to announce His Son's birth.

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. Verses 8

On the hills of Jerusalem, wealthy merchants and priests with perfumed beards slept in warm bedrooms in posh villas on quiet streets. But God did not disturb their sleep.

Instead, He sent His heavenly messenger to men who were but a small step above beggars. Too poor for a home and too poor for a wife, they spent most of the year alone and outdoors. So when they came to town, people screwed up their faces. They smelled of sweat and smoke and sheep. And everyone in town was relieved when they left.

But they were so precious to God, He sent an angel all the way from Heaven just to tell them about His Son's birth.

And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. Verse 9

When Zacharias saw an angel inside the temple sanctuary, he was afraid. And so was Mary when Gabriel came to her.

But the shepherds were not merely afraid. They were terrified and panic stricken.

And for good reason. Since they lived a nomadic life, they could not keep all the rites and rituals of Moses' law. So they were under a rabbinical ban.

They were not actually excommunicated. But they were excluded. They were declared unclean. And they were not welcome at the smoky courtyards of the temple.

So when they saw an angel shining like a summer sun in the darkness of the pasture, they were terrified. In their minds, God would only send an angel to them for one reason. To judge and condemn them.

The shepherd's reaction raises an important question. When we feel God's presence, what are we afraid of? What is it that we fear? What secret terror keeps from trusting Christ?

The angel knew the shepherd's fear was neither normal nor natural; it was negative. It was a stumbling block that could keep them from Christ. So he dealt with it right away.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Verses 10-11

The angel smiled at the shepherds. There was no need to fear. He had not come to judge them or punish them with his great power. He came with good news.

The original word is the one from which we get evangelize and evangelism. Literally, the angel said, "I evangelize to you a great joy." And that joy was available to all people: people of every race, people of every culture, people on every continent, people of every age.

The angel did not say that a baby had been born who would one day become a Savior, either. No, the Child was born a Savior.

More than that, He was the Anointed One, the Messiah. And beyond even that, the baby nestled at Mary's breast was and is and ever shall be Jehovah God, the Creator of the world and Sustainer of seas and stars.

Later, a choir of angels lit up the grasslands and serenaded the shepherds with a glorious chorus.

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." Verses 13-14

The promise in that heavenly chorus is both sure and specific. God offers oceans of peace and fountains of joy to all men. And the Lord promises to give it to us here and now, in this life not merely in the next.

However, the promise is limited to people with whom God is pleased. And that is the problem. God is not pleased with us. He is so holy, righteous and just, He cannot and will not leave sin unpunished.

Too many sensitive hearts are sliced open by our sin for God to smile it away. No, sin must be punished. And the penalty is blood and death.

For the wages of sin is death; Romans 6:23

The soul who sins will die. Ezekiel 18:4

...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. Hebrews 9:22 (ESV)

God was faced with a dilemma. He longed to fill the lives of men and women with peace and joy, with freedom and forgiveness. But they had sinned. So someone had to shed blood. Someone had to die.

There was but one solution. God Himself would have to pay the terrible price for our sins. So He sent His beloved Son to be born as a baby, to live a perfect life, and die as our substitute.

That was the good news the angelic evangelists came to share with the shepherds. And it the very same message God would have us hear.

Jesus Christ, King and Lord and Savior, was slapped and slugged, beaten and abused, skewered and stabbed. He willingly laid down His life to pay the penalty our sins justly deserve.

Now He offers us a new life of freedom and forgiveness. Not as a reward for righteous living, but as a free gift of His goodness and grace.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23

That is the good news angels came to tell the shepherds. And that was wondrous and an eternal honor for those shepherds.

But our heavenly evangelist is God Himself. The Lord of glory comes to us. His Holy Spirit breathes that message into our hearts and minds. He enables us to understand it. And He plants a seed of yearning within us, an aching desire to know the fullness of Jesus Christ.

To know Him face to face and friend to friend.

The Shepherds

Our God is light. And His light reflected from the angels, beaming stark shadows on the grass. Indeed, that light was so brilliant, it was like staring at the sun. And it sent the shepherds sprawling in the dust.

Stunned, they listened to the message. And their hearts leaped like gazelles when heaven's choir started to sing.

Then the light faded and dimmed. And they could see the stars again. The angels were gone. But what were they to do about it all? That question loomed large in their minds.

The shepherds knew they could not go on living as they always had. They had seen angels. They had heard glorious good news. And they knew they had to do something about it.

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." Verse 15

One thing is clear. If we have never been filled with a desire to find Jesus Christ, we have never had a powerful, personal encounter with His Spirit. If anyone has really sensed the powerful presence of the living God, he cannot go on living as he always has.

Still, it was not as if those shepherds had nothing else to do. They were not on a weekend holiday. Watching sheep was their work, their life, their livelihood.

So they were faced with a choice. They could go right away. Or they could wait and find Jesus some other time, some time when they were not so busy, some time when they had nothing else important to do.

But if they had done that, they would never have found Jesus at all. And if we put off coming to Christ when His Spirit stirs us, we will not find Him, either.

That is why the devil seldom urges us to refuse the Gospel. Instead, he tries to persuade us to put off the decision, to wait awhile.

“Not now,” he whispers to us. “You are too busy to bother with religion right now. You have more important things to do. There will be plenty of time for that later.”

He knows that if we do listen to him and wait, the right time will never come at all. But the shepherds did not fall for that. They not only decided to go and find Jesus. They determined to do it right then.

Not sometime soon. Not in the morning when it is light. But this very moment. Right now.

And they did not take a comfortable way or a beaten path to find Jesus, either. They cut across country and went straight to Bethlehem.

Like those shepherds, if we would find Jesus, we cannot delay the decision until a more convenient time. That time will never come.

And we cannot take a slow and easy path to Christ, either. We cannot make salvation a matter to consider or contemplate. No, we must make our way straight to Jesus. We must place personal trust in Him. And we must do so right away.

That is what the shepherds did. And they were successful. They did not merely wander around town trying to find the newborn Savior, only to return home disappointed.

So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. Verse 16

What was true for the shepherds is also true for us. No one who searches for God with a whole heart fails to find Him. If we earnestly and honestly want to find the fullness of Jesus Christ for ourselves, God will make sure we find Him.

You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. Jeremiah 29:13

The angel told the shepherds he came to share a message that would bring them great joy. And he was right. That is exactly what they found.

The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them. Verse 20

If you come to Jesus Christ, if you seek Him with all your heart, if you refuse to let anything stand in your way, you will not be disappointed. If anything, you will be surprised at just how deep God's peace is and how intense His joy is.

But that is not all the shepherds did. They also told everyone they met about what happened that wonderful night.

And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. Verse 18

No one commanded those shepherds to tell their friends about their encounter with the God of life and light and love. They did not take a course in personal evangelism.

They told others because they simply had to. Their cup was running over. And they could not contain the joy that bubbled up in their hearts.

They could not keep silent. After all, the night of Christ's birth was also the first day of the shepherds' new life. Jesus had come.

And when Jesus comes, nothing is ever the same.