

Sermon, Christmas, December 24, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

“So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” (Luke 2:16-20)

Jim Woodrum, SSJE, a monk in the Episcopal community in Cambridge, has made revealing observations about these shepherds. They were people who lived outside of the towns—and outside of society—occupying the bottom rungs of the social order. The nature of their profession actually rendered them unclean. Even had they been able, making the appropriate temple sacrifices with any kind of regularity was out of their reach. They did not have the means nor the time. Yet ironically, it was their job to care for the well-being of sheep that were most likely to be presented in the temple for sacrifice by people who could afford it.

One Sunday morning early, I stopped at a gas station before making my way down Rt. 9. Another woman was filling her tank near me. I noticed she was dressed in hospital scrubs. I asked her if she was on the way to work. She said, “Yes. But I would rather be going where you’re going.” I was in my collar so my profession was obvious too. I offered a silent prayer for her. Surely angels seek out persons like that: persons for whom the Temple is out of reach, yet who may need to glimpse the light of God’s glory.

In the Christmas story we hear tonight from Luke, the angels praise God, singing that glorious hymn we just sang: “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth...” Yet isn’t that what choirs of angels are supposed to do? We join with them as well, singing “Holy, holy, holy Lord...” For those of us on earth, it might be more difficult to summon the song. And yet the shepherds go the angels one better. They praise God to be sure, yet like Mary, they glorify God as well, reflecting all the wonder at what they have just witnessed.

Our prayer book has a section at the back called the Catechism. (I am sure you all memorized it before confirmation). It is an extraordinary outline of our faith, and remains a valuable document. In precise, succinct language it describes all aspects of our life in Christ. It is set up as a series of questions and answers. There is a section in it called “Prayer and Worship.” In answer to the question, “What is prayer?” is the statement: “Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.” (BCP, p. 856) So many ways to pray! Thought and deeds can embody our response to God. Words aren’t even necessary. What a relief. We can approach God as we are, God having given each of us our own way of lifting up our hearts.

The Catechism asks, “What are the principal kinds of prayer?” The answer: “The principal kinds of prayer are adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition.” (BCP, p. 856) Then the Catechism asks,

“What is adoration?” The answer: “Adoration is the lifting up of the heart and mind to God, asking nothing but to enjoy God’s presence.” (BCP p, 857) We hear tonight that the shepherds went with haste to find the manger. “When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child...” (Luke 2:17) Hidden in this statement is surely the prayer of adoration. Based on what they have *seen*: the sign given them by the angels, the shepherds share their joy.

Mary has already encountered an angel who tells her what is about to happen. What might she have felt when she hears from the shepherds that they too have received the good news of this holy birth? We are told that she treasures the shepherds’ words, and ponders them in her heart. Isn’t there something about adoration that transcends words, that enters deeply into our hearts? This is the prayer without words. Between now and tomorrow morning, I pray that we too may find time to adore: to treasure, to ponder, to reflect on this wondrous event.

The prayer of praise is akin to adoration. The Catechism asks, “Why do we praise God?” The answer: “We praise God, not to obtain anything, but because God’s Being draws praise from us.” (BCP p. 857) God gave the shepherds—and us—the grace to behold the Incarnate God. God is now Emmanuel: “God with us.” How wonderful that there is a whole form of prayer that allows us to take in that sight. We are given a holy gift that comes to us first as God’s very presence. We

respond “not to obtain anything,” but to “[join] our voices with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn...”

Back in the early eighties a BBC television production of *The Box of Delights* by John Masefield was broadcast in the U.S. I remember watching the six-part series with wonder and delight during the week before Christmas. Just recently I managed to find a DVD of it. This book, published in 1935, is a beloved Christmas story in England, although less well-known in America, having been broadcast on the radio for many years before being adapted for the screen. A young boy named Kay Harker returns home on the train from school for the Christmas holidays, and has many adventures. Wonderfully there are scenes filmed in real snow with lovely morning light on the clouds. No special effects required! The production team thought it would have to resort to a snow-making machine—but then there was a blizzard right before filming began. (I have always gotten a kick out of the fact that it is the curates at a local seminary that are the bad guys). At the end of the book, the boy and his friends manage to save an historic Christmas Eve service at the (fictional) Tatchester Cathedral before midnight on its one thousandth anniversary by rescuing the bell-ringers, boys’ choir—and even the Bishop! (I won’t give away all the details in case you want to read the book). In the last ten minutes before the service is due to begin, an electrician manages to repair the fuse box. The lights come on, and the organ rings out, just in the nick of time.

The young actor who plays Kay manages to convey beautifully a child's wonder, trust, and indomitable spirit. This is the spirit that I believe the shepherds display also.

If the angels could find the shepherds in the middle of the night, in the middle of a field, and reveal God's glory, then they can find us wherever we are, wherever we "abide." God's glory is all around; it shines out of the darkness. We do not have to create it, or summon it ourselves. We can search for it, and when we see even the least glimmer of hope shining out to us, we can reflect it back. As the angels bid us: be not afraid, only behold.

"Where children pure and happy pray to the blessed Child, where misery cries out to thee, Son of the mother mild; where charity stands watching and faith holds wide the door, the dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and Christmas comes once more." ("O Little Town of Bethlehem," verse 4)