

“Be Hopeful; Be Very Hopeful”

When Queen Elizabeth II visited the United States some years ago, reporters delighted in publishing all the logistics involved: Among other things, her four thousand pounds of luggage included two outfits for every occasion (including a funeral outfit in case someone died), forty pints of plasma, and white kid leather toilet seat covers. She brought along her own hairdresser, two valets, and a host of other attendants. A brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can easily cost twenty million dollars ...and in this case, royalty with very little power, except that of tradition; royalty which really serves only as a figurehead, and a nod to past glory.

It is particularly hard to hear of this kind of excessive extravagance in the name of royalty and tradition during economic times like ours these days. While the rich got richer, friends and family are losing portions of their hard-earned pensions, others are having their jobs cut back or eliminated altogether; times in which, every time we turn on the radio or television and we hear a report on the economy, we are encouraged to “be afraid, be very afraid.”

When we hear this evening of the coming of the King of Kings, the Son of God, Jesus of the royal house of David, the contrast is pretty obvious. No valets, no hairdressers, no attendants; no kid leather toilet seats – or more appropriately, perhaps, no kid leather diapers.

Who were the first to attend to Jesus? Luke tells us it was shepherds. Remarkable, especially for 1st century Middle Easterners. For one thing, shepherds were considered unclean. Why? In search of good grazing shepherds sometimes had to lead their flock outside the Holy land, into Gentile territory. Touching Gentile soil was enough to render a Jew unclean.

Furthermore, most shepherds were unable to keep the Sabbath – their animals don’t take a day off so neither could the shepherds -- so they were in perpetual violation of the Law of Moses.

All of this made shepherds social and religious outcasts. As such, they were not permitted to enter the Jerusalem Temple, and any testimony they might offer in a court of law was considered invalid.

Even so, in Luke’s story, the first people to attend to the King of Kings were not royal valets, but unclean, outcast shepherds.

And what was the first thing the angels say to the shepherds? “Don’t be afraid; be unafraid...for God is up to such an incredible thing the world will have a hard time believing or accepting it!”

What the angels go on to announce isn’t a random act of kindness on God’s part. It isn’t something God just made up as God went along – “Hmm, tonight I think I’ll spring a Messiah on ‘em!” What the angels go on to announce to those stunned shepherds is that what God is up to fulfilling God’s promises, and all of their hopes. God had promised a savior, hadn’t he? God’s people had been waiting, hadn’t they? -- alternately straying from God and hoping in God -- straying, waiting and hoping; straying, waiting and hoping... What does the hymn writer say? “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Jesus tonight.”

It seems that in Scripture the opposite of fear is not bravery. The opposite of fear is hope. By telling the shepherds not to be afraid, the angels were saying to them, contrary to

everything they – and we – hear every day: “Be hopeful. Be VERY hopeful!”

But what did shepherds have to be hopeful about? Talk about a dead-end job, the bottom of the heap. Don’t ever try to sell a 1st century shepherd rose-colored glasses or silver-lined clouds. They are way too earthy for that. And don’t try to sell them feel-good religion, or a religion of prosperity – “God wants you to be RICH!” They are too savvy for that. They had been taught that God doesn’t even want them in God’s Temple, much less hob-knobbing with the rich and famous. So what on earth do shepherds have to be hopeful about?

Thankfully, the angels explain (if I may paraphrase): “Remember all those promises about a Messiah? Well, honey! Have we got news for you! To you is born this very day, in the city of David, a Savior, the Messiah!”

With the coming of God’s promised Messiah, the shepherds now have everything to be hopeful about! Life isn’t just about scraping by day to day, only to die in the end. God isn’t some disinterested or angry deity with no use for the likes of them. And the promised Messiah didn’t come to the legalistic and self-righteous, in a palace or the great Jerusalem Temple – but to them.

The angel goes on to tell them, “You will find the new king in Bethlehem, lying in a manger. Don’t go looking in royal palaces or richly appointed embassies; you won’t find God’s Messiah there! You’re gonna find him in ordinary peasant surroundings like your own! The Messiah was not born in a multi-million dollar mansion where you are forbidden to go; the glory of God isn’t trapped in the Temple where you are outcasts. The King of Kings doesn’t travel in a private limo or a corporate jet with scores of body guards. The glory of God dwells in this infant Jesus, God’s promised Messiah, who lives where you live – not a privileged life of entitlement, but a common life of scraping by one day at a time. So, don’t be afraid. Be hopeful, be very hopeful!”

These guys became so hopeful, they didn’t hang around asking one another, “Say...did you just see what I saw??” Luke says, they went “with haste” to see this baby and his young, teenaged parents. Remember when I said they were not considered to be credible witnesses in court? Well, when they saw him, just the way the angels described they would, they told everyone who would listen what they had witnessed out in the fields – and for some remarkable reason, people believed them!

Luke writes that when they left Jesus and his parents, they left “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Now, we have a baby being born into our family and day now– our daughter’s 3rd child and our 3rd grandchild. Normally, at the birth of a child, all the family members on both the mother’s and father’s sides of the family, fuss and fuss and ooh and aaah and carry on about how beautiful the baby is, and doesn’t she have her father’s eyes and her mother’s nose, and Oh! doesn’t that just remind you of the mother, and Ah! isn’t that facial expression just the spitting image of the father, and on and on... We might expect a little oohing and aahing from other friends. And we all have great hopes for this child, for what she might become, who she might be some day.

But what the shepherds experienced was a different kind of hope. Paul says in his letter to the Romans, chapter 8, that hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. The hope of the Messiah, born among us, to live among us is a sacred hope. It assures us that when God makes promises,

God keeps them; that when God says he loves us w/o limit, God does love us w/o limit, unconditionally; that when Jesus says, "One day, when you are face to face with death, I will come and take you to myself, so that where I am, you will be also" we know he will, because he came first to be with us here, in this life.

Sacred hope tell us that Christ's love casts out our fear; that we are worth more than the value of our pension plan or bank account; that God has placed us in families and communities of faith in all sorts of ways and places so that we don't have to live "everyone for himself," but as is written in Acts about the early church:

"All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

That is the sacred hope the angels brought to those despised shepherds so many years ago; that is sacred hope the birth of Christ continues to bring every time he is born in us and in his church – the hope that in him, we are more than the sum total of our financial assets, more than the sum total of our greed and self-preoccupation, more than the sum total of the fears and insecurities, far, FAR more than our imperfections and failures.

The baby Jesus, the infant Messiah, cannot, *will not* remain a sweet religious tale told once a year in candlelight worship services at a church year you. Our hope continues to live in the Jesus who grew up...to adulthood...who took on the sins of the world and died, who conquered sin and death and hell, and rose again – not only that we might live again someday in eternity, but that our lives, even our suffering, will have meaning here and now.

With the angels, God tonight proclaims to you: Emmanuel, God with us, has come! Not only that, but he will come again! Be hopeful. Be very hopeful! Amen.

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