

Tuesday, December 24, 2019

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9.2-7; Luke 2.1-20

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Guests at the Inn”

We know the story. Of course, we just heard it read for the umpteenth time. But even so, we know it so well most of us could pretty much recite it from memory. At the very least, we would get all the major points right.

We know the place. The city of David called Bethlehem. And more specifically, a manger in a stable associated with one of the inns in Bethlehem.

And we know the cast of characters. Mary and Joseph, arriving in Bethlehem for the census. Shepherds living in the fields outside Bethlehem, tending their flocks. Angelic messengers sent from Heaven to proclaim the birth of “a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” And, of course, the baby Jesus, who is born into the midst of this place under the adoring eyes of this cast of characters.

But there’s one place that only receives a passing mention and a cast of characters that receives no mention at all—although their presence is implied. That place is an inn. One of many in Bethlehem. And the other characters are the guests of that crowded inn and others that are nearby.

Have you ever stopped to wonder, in all your hearings of this story, about the many unnamed guests of that inn? All we know about them is that they came to Bethlehem for the same reason as Mary and Joseph—to participate in a census mandated by the Roman Empire. We can deduce that they were all descended from the tribe of Judah by birth or by marriage. And that they were, therefore, Jewish. Other than that, we cannot be certain. It’s likely that they represented a good cross-section of Jewish society—rich and poor, certainly male and female, professionals and common laborers, educated and illiterate, young and old.

We know what Mary and Joseph were doing that night. Mary was giving birth to Jesus, the Savior of the world, while Joseph looked on, probably anxious about what would happen to his wife and her newborn infant. We know what the shepherds in the fields on the outskirts of town were doing that night. They were busy at work in the fields watching their flocks of sheep, until they were informed of what was going on in town, at which point they high-tailed it to the stable to see the miracle that was happening. We know what the angels were doing that night. Proclaiming the news of the most extraordinary event to happen in all of human history. But what were the guests of the inn doing that night? Given the fact that it was late at night, it’s highly likely that most of them were in their rooms asleep. Some may have been out at local establishments eating or drinking, assuming there were such places and that they were even open at that hour. So, it’s pretty safe to say that most if not all of the guests of the inn were completely oblivious to what was going on in the nearby stable. Just as any of us staying in a

hotel in a strange city would be completely oblivious to what might be happening in the parking structure of our hotel.

I imagine that as the guests of the inn awoke in the morning, they were initially concerned with their own problems, their own agendas. But all of that would have slowly given way to something bigger, something more important, than their own concerns. They slowly began finding out about what had happened the night before. Who knows, maybe some of the shepherds were still hanging around the manger, adoring the miracle that lay before them. After all, it was not likely that they would come all that distance into town from the fields, took a quick peak, and then rush back home. They would have wanted to linger. To take in the sight of the One whose birth had been foretold by the prophets. Whose birth was proclaimed to them—to lowly shepherds—by heavenly messengers. Some of the shepherds, in their excitement, would have conveyed to any and all who would listen what transpired the night before. The angels' appearance. Their message that the long-awaited Messiah had been born right here in Bethlehem. And how the shepherds found this Messiah, right where the angels told them. Right here in the inn's stable.

Of course, there were probably some who would have been skeptical. Who would not believe what the shepherds told them. Who would believe a bunch of shepherds anyway? After all, they were among the lowest of the low, socially speaking. Poor, dirty, crude, uneducated people, living on the edge of society, literally and figuratively. But others would have wanted to believe that all that the shepherds said was true. They had been waiting for so long for the coming of a savior. For the coming of their Savior. Wasn't this what the prophecies of Isaiah, one of the greatest prophets, had been about? "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined" (Is 9.2). Surely, this was the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Some who rose that morning, hearing the news of the events the night before, would have made their way to the stable. To see the babe in the manger. The one whom the angels had declared to be their Savior, their Messiah, their Lord. The one of whom the Prophet declared "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Is 9.6). A miraculous event that "the zeal of the Lord of hosts [would] do" (Is 9.7) for his people. One look. One look would have been all that it took for them to know that what the shepherds said was true. That what the angels said was true. That what the Prophet foretold was true.

When they went to bed the night before, things were status quo. They were an oppressed people. But they awoke to a new reality. One in which they were now a people liberated, a people saved. Overnight, their God had fulfilled his promises to his people. He had broken into humanity, taking the form of a baby. Being born into a dirty manger located in a backwater town in a backwater province of the Empire. And that birth was announced by the highest of heavenly beings to the lowest of the low. This is how God works. This is what God's love looks like. That God loves his people so much that he was willing to enter into some of the lowest possible conditions so as to be with his people face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh. To be in relationship with them in a way that had never happened in all of history. Out of love for us. Out of a desire to free us from whatever oppresses us, whatever holds us captive.

This miraculous event was hard to believe 2,000 years ago. And sometimes, it's hard to believe even now. Even though the world is radically different in so many ways, in so many ways little has changed. How little we as humans have changed. It is still so easy to become consumed with our own concerns, our own problems, our own agendas. Like those guests of the various inns at Bethlehem so long ago, we awake in our own little worlds, often oblivious to what God is doing right in our midst. What God did in our midst on that cold night 2,000 years ago. What God continues to do in our midst even today. Rudolf Otto Wiemer, 20th century German poet and playwright, wrote "From the beginning, writers of the Christmas story have been bothered by the inn, with the stable and manger close at hand. That is where we find ourselves: not by the shepherds, whose poverty and simplicity we lack; and not by the wise men, whose watchfulness and decisiveness we lack. We are, at best, guests at the inn. We sleep, we follow our own plans and dreams. Can we be awakened by the angels' news? That is the question." (Rudolf Otto Wiemer, from the foreword to his 1959 play "The End of the Night," quoted in Plough Daily Dig, 11/21/19).

On this most holy of nights, as we celebrate the most spectacular event in human history—the fact that God became incarnate in human flesh, became one of us—may we who are guests at the inn be awakened to the new reality of what God is doing in our midst. May we be awakened to the incredible love God demonstrated and continues to demonstrate for us through the birth of his Son. May our ears be open to hear the "good news of great joy for all the people." That "to you is born this day . . . a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Merry Christmas!