

Fact, Faith, Mission

Luke 2:8-20

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I had the privilege three times in my life to carry my own babies in my arms. My children. Stephanie, Rosemarie, Justine...

And then three times - thus far - I held new born grandchildren in my arms. Hugo, Suzanne, Louise..

Lovely.

My children, my grandchildren.

But never would my wife, or my daughter, say to me, 'this child, or this grandchild, is born for you'. We are always very quick to underline the fact that our children have their own life, they do not belong to us, we only help them grow up. They are born for the glory of God, to become mature adults hopefully.

So the words of the angels to the shepherds were very strange. A child is born for you. For your sake. For your benefit. For your joy.

1. Fact

'For us?' The shepherds must have been bewildered. They were not used to anything in life being 'for them'. They were beyond the pale. Despised by all.

Shepherds did the dirty work. Forget the romantic views we nowadays have of shepherds. That is just because we do not have shepherds in our midst.

To work all day with sheep, to keep them safe, to guard them day and night, was a tough job, and dirty.

They would be in touch with the animals - and hard to avoid - with their excrements, which made them smelly types.

Even worse for them, they were - by being in touch with that dirt - unclean from the perspective of the Jewish laws of those days. We learn this from the Rabbinic books.

And interestingly, these shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem, they did not take care of just some ordinary sheep - these were sheep destined for the worship in the temple. To be slaughtered in the temple.



The church historian Eusebius linked the fields of the shepherds to a unique biblical location called Migdal Eder, which translated means the “tower of the flock”.

According to the Jewish Talmud, all cattle found in the area surrounding Jerusalem “as far as Migdal Eder” were deemed to be holy and consecrated and could only be used for sacrifices in the Temple, in particular for the Passover sacrifices.

This means the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem served the sacrificial system of the Temple. They served the Old Testament worship service that was meant to free people from their sins; sacrifice such an animal in the Temple and you would be forgiven.

But the shepherds themselves were not allowed to enter the Temple except after a long process of ritual washings, because their work made them unclean.



And now the angels tell them that the Messiah, the Saviour, is born for them. That is an amazing reversal of their fate.

Men who stood with empty hands when it came to God and serving God, were now told that the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord, was for them.

And those are the facts. And this is great to know.

Jesus was not just any child. He had come from the world of God, to be for the shepherds, for all Israelites, for the world.

The message of the angels was not about an individual gospel, they did not proclaim a private faith.

Actually nothing is private if a host of angels enlightens the skies, but it was also not private, in the sense that the angels addressed them as a group, and not individually. Unto you a child is born, is plural. The whole group is addressed.

The pious shepherds. That shepherd that never thought much about religion. That shepherd who cursed a lot. And the shepherd who could never stop thinking of all the girls he had had. The shepherd who had the nasty habit of skipping work so that the other shepherds had to work harder.

The message was for all. For the good, and the bad, and all of us who are somewhere in between totally good and utterly depraved. Jesus came to offer salvation to all. He is joy for the world.

He is the only child ever to be born not for his own development, not to become his independent self.

He came to serve God, to embrace the world, to take us all into his embrace to present us to his Father. To reconcile us to God, and to give us joy.

2. Faith

But that does not seem to impact the world much, does it?

The fact that Jesus was born for the world and to give joy to the world, is real. But it becomes only effective if we also appropriate the fact. If we accept it. If we believe it.

The facts that we know so well, the stories that we repeat again and again in church, have to sink down from the region of the brain, to the area of the heart. From fact to faith.

This journey from fact to faith, from head to heart, begins with considering what happened at the first Christmas. By considering it well. By staring at the facts with an open heart.



The announcement of the birth of Jesus by angels to the virgin Mary; the choir of angels announcing his birth to the shepherds; the Magi who saw a star; Herod who tried to kill the child.

What does it mean? What does it signify?

The followers of Jesus concluded, that Jesus was the self-revelation of God; the Word had become flesh. God has come to us.

Jesus is God giving himself to us, for us, for our benefit.

Isaiah, who predicted around 700BC that the savior was to come, calls this child Mighty God, Everlasting Father.

And he said, 'unto us a child us given'. That is the language of faith. The angels sang: 'A child is born for you', and we say, 'Yes Lord Jesus, I believe, you came for us. You came for me.'

We trust the angels, we believe what they say, and with the shepherds we then go to the child. We seek him. We want to see Jesus with our own eyes. Not from hearsay. We want to know him personally.

The shepherds, Mary and Joseph, the Magi, they touched with their hands, they saw with their own eyes the Word of Life. God incarnate.

Later the apostles followed Jesus when he had grown up. They saw him, and they believed passionately - because they had seen him - Son of God, Saviour of the world.

How can we believe him? We have not seen the child as the shepherds did, nor the grown up Jesus, who was seen by the apostles.

Our faith begins with the testimony of those who saw him with their own eyes.

And as we believe, we begin to see him as well, not with our eyes, but with the eyes of our soul. The eyes of our heart.

If we ponder the biblical facts - of Christmas, and of the whole life of Jesus, and of his death and resurrection, and we do that with a heart that is willing to accept, and believe, than that heart will also catch the vision of the child, of Jesus.

Faith is not something that just happens. We are not born with it, we do not inherit it from parents, we do not catch it like the flu. Faith comes from carefully considering, studying, pondering the facts, with an open heart.

The more time we take to focus on the message of the angels, the apostles, the Holy Scriptures as a whole, the more our faith will grow.

The message of joy becomes our joy, if we let our hearts be flooded with that message of the angels: a child is born for you. A child is born for us. A child is born for me.

3. Mission

The shepherds, not particularly religious, or nice, or pious people, were the first to hear the message. It was a coincidence that those very shepherds cared for the sheep in the field outside Bethlehem. They were lucky that they were on duty that very night.

Yes, the child was born for them, but if there had been other shepherds the message would have been the same. Because Christ came for all of us. And if we have faith, we can also experience some of the joy that he brings to the world.

But for those shepherds, and for us, it does not stop with contemplating Jesus and believing in him.

Looking at Jesus with a faithful heart makes us also active. Our faith is dynamic. You cannot look at Jesus long, and still sit on your couch unchanged.

The shepherds left the scene, and they became people of praise.

The angels were praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven", and the shepherds were changed by the meeting with Jesus. They glorified and praised God. So actually, they did what the angels did. Quite a change for those characters!



What I find interesting is that Luke in his Gospel-description writes, that the shepherds returned. They returned and praised God.

Why is it specifically relevant for Luke to tell us the shepherds returned? Maybe Luke wants to underline that they went back to their sheep. To the dirt. To the tough life.

Because that is what we are all supposed to do. With a vision of Jesus, with a heart filled with faith, and joy, we go back to our own station in life.

That is the mission of the church, and of each of us. To be lavished by our meeting with Jesus Christ, to drink ourselves full, as it were, to then return to the desert of life. To the sheep that need us.

After the uplifting holidays, after meeting with Jesus, we go joyfully, full of praise, back to our work, our homes, our life.

Conclusion

We must never stop drinking from the well. We must never stop going to Jesus, to see him with our spiritual eyes. To receive joy, and peace, and love in his presence. That is where our faith becomes stronger.

But we always return to bring that peace and love and joy of our Saviour to the world we are living in.

There are many sheep that need your help. So many people suffer. Your friends, your colleagues. The world is a cold and tough place for many.

We are not better people than all those around us. But we have met our Lord and Saviour, and this child has changed us, has given us hope, he has given us joy.

Jesus was born for you. And we, followers of Jesus, are now for the world. For others. That is how we go into the world. Filled with Jesus, filled with joy.

That's a high calling for us. Not easy. That is why we go back again and again to the Gospel, to the church, to Jesus, to see him with our heart, to meet with him in our soul, to believe in him, to be filled with him and with his joy again and again.

Amen