

The Shepherds saw God's Glory

Luke 2.1-20

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

It was night in Bethlehem, and in the fields outside the village the shepherds tried to stay awake in order to guard their sheep.

These sheep belonged to the temple in Jerusalem - they were raised for being used as sacrifices in the liturgy of Israel. So the shepherds had to be extra careful that nothing happened. They had to ensure that every sheep would be in perfect shape - to be sacrificed.

The shepherds did not know that in the small city of Bethlehem, Jesus was born. But an angel came to tell them. This was so totally unexpected! The thick darkness and quiet of the night was pierced by the appearance of an angel.

When the angel came, the glory of the Lord shone around them.

1. Great fear

The shepherds were terrified when an angel appeared to them. It was not just the appearance of an angel - that must be awe-inspiring enough; it probably did not often happen to them.

But it was the glory of the Lord that shone around them, that truly frightened them.

The glory of God was not just the brightness of the angel. It was much more meaningful and more frightening than the appearance of the angel.

When Moses led the tribes of Israel out of Egypt, back to the promised land, the Glory of the Lord was visible to Israel in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire.

The glory of the Lord - that was how Israel spoke of the amazing impact of the personal presence of God in their history. It was how God appeared on Mount Sinai when he gave Israel the 10 commandments, in fire, and smoke and thunder.

Then, for 400 years or so, God was present in the midst of Israel in the tabernacle. The Glory shown over the tent of the tabernacle.



And for another 400 years the Glory shown over Solomon's temple in Jerusalem.

But then, because of its sins, Judah was taken into captivity. Ezekiel saw in a vision the pillar of fire, the symbol of God's presence, rise up and leave the temple. God was no longer in the land, so to say.



And when Israel built its new temple - the one that the shepherds could almost see in the distance by daytime - that temple was gorgeous but the glory of God had never returned to it.

Where was God? It seemed that God had left the land. And now after so many centuries of darkness God in his Glory appeared to the shepherds. He bypassed the temple of the establishment, but he returned to Israel by first showing himself to the despised shepherds.

Needless to say, this awesome display of God's presence was frightening to these Shepherds, people who were not considered worthy of even entering the temple.

Because of their vocation, shepherds were considered unclean and could not take part in temple worship without ritual cleansing. They were despised by the people, considered untrustworthy, and unable to testify in a court of law. They were an example of the outcasts that Jesus came to save.

God revealed the birth of Jesus Christ first to the shepherds. He chose those who are despised, the poor, the rejected. To them he makes himself known.

As he wants to be known by us. You are very special people - and God wants to show his glory to you. He wants to be Emmanuel, God with us.

And like the shepherds, we do not need to fear.

2. Great joy

Fear not, the angel said to the shepherds, because 'I bring you good news of a great joy for all the people.'

Great fear can be replaced by great joy. The Shepherds were certainly joyful after they listened to the word of God spoken by the angel, and even more when they found the baby in the manger, exactly as the angel had predicted.

True joy transcends circumstances; even when we are suffering, we can have joy in our hearts. We may feel pain in the members of our bodies, but we can have joy in our inner being. The opposite also happens. We may have great circumstances, but inside, we are hurting.

As Christians we often fail to experience joy. Sometimes we get so caught up in the

issues of life that we forget to rejoice in the Lord and what he has done for us.

This is why St Paul commands us once and again in his letter to Philipians to rejoice in the Lord always. We can choose to let Christ be our joy, to let Him give us joy.

Sure, we may try to manufacture our own joy, which will not last and will fail. The Christmas joy is over for most people when the Christmas tree goes back into the box.

Only when we find our happiness in the person of Jesus can we experience true and lasting joy.

We may be sad because of the circumstances of our world and of our lives - and experience his

comfort and joy at the same time.

Jesus says to his followers, in John 15:11, "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full." Jesus reminds us: we will not have fullness of joy unless we listen to him as his followers.

The angel said to the shepherds that the good news of great joy is for all people. This means, it is also for us. If you live your life in fear of darkness, of death, fear of people, fear of sickness, fear of God, then the angel has a message for you today as well.

You can have great joy. Because you have a great saviour

3. Great Saviour

The good news for the shepherds is that a baby is born, a baby who is a Saviour, Christ the Lord.

Even before His birth, Jesus had brought joy, as Mary his mother sang in her song "and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," (Luke 1.47)

And John the Baptist, when he was still in the womb of his mother Elisabeth, 'leaped for joy' when Mary told Elisabeth that she would have a baby. (Luke 1.44).

God does not have to frighten you - he can give you great joy. But for receiving this joy, we have to go to God himself as he revealed himself in Jesus the Saviour, the Christmas baby.

Imagine - God being born in our dark world. But he decided to do this and he did this so that all people can meet with him, and communicate with him, and so that this world will one day be right on its feet again.



How we need this in our days... today almost 70 million people are adrift as refugees. A higher figure than ever in history.

Many of our own families have great needs.

Life is short and hard for many.

As far as I know, according to most statistics, all people eventually die.

But in the midst of this, God tells us - do not fear, have great joy - by looking at the Christmas child. He is our saviour. He connects us with God, the source of goodness and of life. He brings us back to the heart of God the Father.

Let us in the year ahead, focus a lot on the mercy of God; He is not scary, but he brings us joy.

He began doing this with Christmas, by showing Jesus Christ to the shepherds.

And he desires to do the same to you and I today. If we look at the child born with Christmas, and believe that he is the one who brings us back to God - then our joy will be great.

Conclusion

May I suggest that as we participate in holy eucharist today, you look at him - with the eyes of your mind; and that you express to him your desire for this great joy while you go to the table, while you partake of the body and blood of Christ.

This Christmas can be a time of joy for us - with family, with friends, but it can be a time of much greater joy if we allow Jesus Christ to be the center of our heart and mind.

Where he is, he gives great joy. It is not that complicated. Ask him, and he will give. If he is in your life, the joy comes with him.

May God bless you as you seek his child - Jesus Christ the Saviour. Have a merry christmas, full of great joy.

+ Amen

