

5-Fold Thanksgiving

Christmas 2011

Church of the Advent, Colwood BC Rev. Ken Gray

In this, my seventh Christmas Eve sermon in this church, and my twenty-fifth or more Christmas Eve preaching, and possibly my fifty-fourth reflection on God's arrival in the person of Jesus Christ at Bethlehem, I focus on one word alone, and the word is THANKSGIVING. Lest you think I have my festivals mixed up, and that I am stuck in early October, I remind you that we gather tonight out of gratitude for God's gift to us of Jesus, the One Christians call Saviour, Lord, Friend, Christ and Messiah. Tonight's story goes like this:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered.

So what can we be thankful for? First, THANK GOD FOR TAXES. In the Roman world, registration leads to taxation, and as in our day, this is not a bad thing. Taxes enable members of a province and nation to share along agreed terms with ourselves; the politics come in the details and regulations. The morality of a culture is tangibly expressed in its taxation agreements, whether in the administration of social services including health, or its response to economic and environmental challenges.

Additionally, our story tonight makes an important though oblique reference to the challenge of stewardship. Tonight's story speaks to the decisions arising from wealth or the lack of it. In literary terms, a political and economic process brought the Holy Family to a particular place so that later Christians could make the connection between Jesus and the Hebrew prophetic tradition. In Bethlehem, a son of the royal King David would commence his influential and saving life journey. From a background of social organization, emerges the drive and leadership to usurp a society about to be socially disturbed and re-configured. So . . . THANK GOD, FOR TAXES.

Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Two principal characters are about to become three. The father hovers quietly about, for this is the mother's show. So . . . THANK GOD FOR MOTHERS. No, tonight is not the "mother's day in May" we all know, but it is "a mother's day" (or night) for sure--everyone else can go for coffee. Mary not only delivers a child, but she alone begins to sense the significance of the event. Mary is the strong and enviable character here. "Mary (alone) treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." In the events and happenings of daily life, technology is great,

action and strength are helpful, but thought and strategy reign supreme. So . . . THANK GOD FOR MARY and for MOTHERS.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

The private now becomes public. An intimate event in enclosed space quickly broadens into the public realm. We move from the barn to the village green to use the language of medieval England. And we meet characters, real earthy, rootsy characters, who make us laugh. So . . . THANK GOD FOR SHEPHERDS.

This is the interactive section of my sermon tonight. You aren't expecting this but hey, the doors are barred, so help me out. With what words do you describe the shepherds?

(Samples include: impulsive, loud, dirty, smelly, eager, stilly, clown, close to the land/animals, poor, male, young, enthusiastic faith, refreshing, responsive, keen, curious)

You know and love these folks. They are somehow real--in the midst of a very "unreal" story. They bring muscle to the magic, humanity to meet divinity in a cosmic/earthly drama. So . . . THANK GOD FOR SHEPHERDS

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

How many times have we seen these words on Christmas cards on online slideshows. "Good news of great joy." If we have heard these words too often, people in Jesus' day heard them not at all. It was not a happy time in the Middle East.. The Romans were in charge for first-century Palestine and life was brutal. A once proud Israeli nation had been trampled by generations of warring neighbours. Holy shrines and cities had been destroyed. People were displaced and often murdered. The promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were if not forgotten, then invisible. Like Ellie Wiesel who stood outside Auschwitz prison camp and claimed that "God was not there" Israel felt abandoned by God and had lost hope and faith. They believed that God's departure was because of their own unfaithfulness.

So when the Shepherds were scared, their reaction was understandable. They expected punishment - as did Israel. They feared a Godly encounter, as many do in our own day. The "stuff" of their own lives pile so high that the divine is hidden behind a pile of (well, you know what I mean). God, however, had other ideas, and places the Good News of relief, restitution, and reunion, in the song of the angels.

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

This is the sublime Good News of this evening, and so my final expression of thanksgiving goes like this . . . THANK GOD, THAT GOD DOES NOT GIVE UP.

Whether on events, or on the church, or on people, like you and me, God does not give up. We give up on each other, yes we do. God does not give up. We lose patience with neighbours, friends and family and even, sometimes, ourselves. God does not give up. To the most addicted, to the most depraved, to the subtly confused or simply religiously lazy, God does not deny us appropriate attention.

Yes, it's hard to believe. Belief is hard sometimes. A parent told me the other day they would not give up on their child. This is right and true. Such tenacity, such commitment over time, strengthens me and illustrates God's commitment to all of us, all the time.

Thanks be to God, Alleluia, Amen.