

Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
The Solemnity of Christmas, Dec. 24-25, 2020, Cycle B

Once again, we hear the apostle Paul proclaim, as we do every year at Christmas Mass during the night: **"The grace of God has appeared, saving all..."** In Luke's nativity story, the angels tell the shepherds: **"Today in the City of David, a Savior has been born for you who is Christ the Lord."** And so, along with the angels, we come rejoicing, who sang to the shepherds that in Jesus, born in Bethlehem, our God has become one with us in flesh – one with us in our broken, wounded world. And a sorely broken wounded world it is this year having endured the coronavirus and Covid-19.

The evangelist Luke presents us with a very beautiful and touching story of the Nativity. Only the gospels of Matthew and Luke present stories of the birth of Jesus. Matthew's nativity story we always hear read on the Solemnity of Epiphany, where Magi from the east come to rejoice at the birth of the Messiah. Luke, however, chooses shepherds as the first recipients of **"good news of great joy to be shared by all the people."** Why simple shepherds? Why not important wise men or great kings as Matthew chose? What is Luke trying to teach us with poor, lowly shepherds? In Jesus' time, shepherds were among the poorest and most marginalized people of Judean society. Being extremely poor and marginalized, shepherds were stereotyped as suspicious and untrustworthy people. In the social economy of things, shepherds just did not count; as a result, shepherds were ostracized by the Jewish society and others in the world of Jesus' time.

Shepherds were seen as dangerous outsiders who lived rough lives in the wilderness and did not interact easily with people in towns and cities. They were certainly despised by the Jewish religious elites, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees. Shepherds were lax observers of the Mosaic law. Guarding their sheep all day and night offered no Sabbath breaks. And, undoubtedly, whenever shepherds appeared on the scene, I am sure they carried a liberal dose of the fragrance of their flock. I believe you get the picture. Shepherds of Luke's day would probably not be the first people you might invite over to meet your newborn baby.

Yet, shepherds were the ones God invites first to come and meet the newborn Messiah. Luke is telling us that this newborn Messiah has come for those in the world who are despised, downtrodden, and pushed to the margins of society; for those who might find themselves lost, confused, and misled. The marginalized are the people Jesus would associate with constantly in his ministry to the chagrin of the authorities, both secular and religious. Luke is reminding us, if we want to be followers of the Babe of Bethlehem, then we must reach outside the boundaries of our hearts, as Jesus did and does, and do something to lift up the poor and the broken of our communities with compassion and justice. This babe of Bethlehem will be the one who tells the story of the rich and Lazarus, that rich man who ignored the starving Lazarus lying on his doorstep. Absolutely no one can be excluded from the embrace of God's love.

Arriving at the stable the shepherds stoop down and gaze upon a newborn babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, as the angels had told them. Lying in a manger, a food trough for animals! Manger means "to eat"! What the shepherds witness is that God sent the gift of His Son not with public fanfare or ceremony, but in smallness, hiddenness, and humility. They, the simple shepherds, understood that something significant was happening. God comes to be one with us, Emmanuel, as a small child, homeless, powerless, defenseless, flesh of our flesh, and bone of our bones. ***continued***

Those shepherds were so moved by their experience that they became Jesus' first evangelists. Luke tells us the shepherds repeated to Mary and Joseph what the angels revealed, and repeated what they had heard again and again to everyone who would listen – they made the Good News Known.

Luke's Christmas story invites us to re-examine our expectations for where to find God. The lessons of the Christmas story bear repeating year after year because we learn the lessons so slowly. We hear the stories, but the words don't sink in deep enough. The shepherds teach us that God is to be found in the ordinary everyday humdrum of our lives – especially in those who are of the meagerest of resources and are shunned and ostracized by others. And like the shepherds, we should be so moved that God is one with us in our ordinariness, we should rejoice and spread the Good News to others. Christmas should turn us, too, into evangelists for Jesus; if not, then the story of Christ has not sunk in!

Yes, each of us is to pass on the mystery of the very God we seek and celebrate this evening. Each of us is to pass on the mystery of God enfleshed from generation to generation through the lived experience of our own daily lives.

We must come to know, as the shepherds discovered that we are God's hands that touch and heal the lives of the sick. We are God's feet that willingly walk the extra mile for the person in need. We are God's arms that bend down to pick up those who have fallen. We are God's eyes that can see the image of God in all people, and God's voice that speaks justice and peace. We are God's ears that hear the cry of the poor, and God's heart that bears the compassion of the suffering. St. Irenaeus sums up what God is teaching us in the mystery of the Incarnation. "Jesus Christ became what we are in order that we might become what he himself is."

Song: "I Wonder as I Wander"

I wonder as I wander out under the sky
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die
For poor on'ry people like you and like I;
I wonder as I wander out under the sky

When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cow's stall
With wise men and farmers and shepherds and all
But high from God's heaven, a star's light did fall
And the promise of ages it then did recall.

If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing
A star in the sky or a bird on the wing
Or all of God's Angels in heaven to sing
He surely could have it, 'cause he was the King

I wonder as I wander out under the sky
How Jesus the Savior did come to for die
For poor on'ry people like you and I;
I wonder as I wander out under the sky