

“It’s Quiet In Bethlehem Tonight”

- I. Introduction: It’s quiet in Bethlehem tonight. It has not always been quiet there. Several years ago just before Christmas a group of militants seized the main city building, demanding more jobs for Palestinian workers. The siege was over in a matter of hours when compromise was brokered between the Palestinian factions. Bethlehem, located inside the Palestinian territories, is a city that has seen many political powers come and go. In the center of the city is a large open plaza called Manger Square where Christian pilgrims often gather on Christmas Eve to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. At the end of Manger Square is one of the oldest Christian churches in the world, the Church of the Nativity. The Emperor Constantine built the original church in the fourth century on top of a cave or grotto that is thought by some to be the specific birthplace of Jesus. There have been services in the Church of the Nativity tonight, and the faithful have gathered in Manger Square outside the church. Not too far way is a field known as Shepherd’s Field. Services are held there as well. Many prayers, many thanksgivings, and many petitions have been lifted up to God in Bethlehem this Christmas Eve. It’s quiet in Bethlehem tonight.

- II. It was also quiet in Bethlehem on that first Christmas Eve described in the Gospel of Luke. The nights are cool in Bethlehem in December, and perhaps the shepherds were huddled around a fire to stay warm. Then it happened. The quietness in Bethlehem was broken, first by one and then by a whole chorus of angels announcing the birth of Christ the Lord in the small town of Bethlehem. Whenever God or one of God’s agents breaks into our lives, reality as we know it is turned upside down, and life changes. So it was with the shepherds. It didn’t stay quiet in Bethlehem that first Christmas Eve.

The shepherds are unlikely heroes, don’t you think? Just common working people who are not even named by the gospel writer. They appear only once in Scripture – in the version we read tonight from Luke. Yet they play a central role in our Christmas drama. They were the very first ones summoned to celebrate the birth of Jesus with Mary and Joseph. Why would God have selected such ordinary people for such an extraordinary event? God has high regard for the common folk, and Luke’s gospel emphasizes God’s love for them. For example, Christ’s human father was a carpenter who worked with his hands for a living. Christ was born in ever so humble a place, after his homeless parents were granted shelter by an inn keeper. In the birth of His Son celebrated again each Christmas, God loves and lifts up the ordinary.

But there is more to this selection of the shepherds. From the very beginning of his life, Christ was surrounded by those who responded energetically to him. You see the gift of Christ is like gifts of all kinds – it must be received. The gift's value comes from the generosity of the giver coupled with the recipient's joyful acceptance of the gift. The value of a gift emerges from the interaction between the heart of the giver and the heart of the receiver. In a mystical and beautiful way, the giver and receiver become one through the gift. Remember the short story "The Gift of the Magi" written by O. Henry? In this story a young couple struggles to express their love for one another although they have very little money with which to buy one another Christmas gifts. Their names are Jim and Della. Each has a most prized possession that he or she valued deeply. Jim had a pocket watch that was given to him by his father. Della had long beautiful shiny hair. In order to buy one another a present, they each decided to sacrifice their prized possession. Jim sold his watch to buy Della a set of combs for her hair, and Della decided to cut and sell her hair in order to purchase a chain for Jim's pocket watch. When they exchanged their gifts, although there was a sadness that they couldn't now use the gifts they'd been given, there was an even more powerful joy that came out of experiencing how much each was loved by the other. Their gifts were given and received and the love between them fueled the power of their exchange.

Returning to Bethlehem this Christmas Eve, we see a beautiful gift being given. The angels first came to the shepherds and offered them the wonderful gift of a Savior, Christ the Lord. They then had a choice to make: to explore this gift the angels offered them or to pull back in fear. Their response was to say, "Let's go see for ourselves." What they saw and experienced transformed them. The last thing we hear about the shepherds is that they went forth to make known what they had seen. They had received the gift of Jesus Christ, they had understood its value, and they had set out to share that gift with others. So it has been with generation after generation of Christians since then. The gift of Christ is not to be hoarded or to be tightly clutched. It is meant to be given to us, through us, and beyond us.

- III. The gift of love. You see, the gift of Jesus Christ is a gift that first must be accepted in our lives, be allowed to transform us, and then intentionally be given through us to others. In the book entitled *If God Is Love: Rediscovering Grace in an Ungracious World*, the authors (Phillip Gully and James Mulholland, 2004) emphasize that the gift of Jesus Christ is a pass-through gift of love. They stress that Christmas is a time to reflect upon how we receive the gift of Jesus Christ affects how we live. They ask the question: Is it a gift that we seek to keep only for ourselves, or does that gift lead us to share God's love with others? They tell a story attributed to the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn that touches upon that theme.

Once upon a time there was a magic ring that gave its wearer the gifts of grace, kindness, and generosity. When the owner of the ring was on his deathbed, each of his

three sons came in one at a time and asked for the ring. In reply, the old man promised the ring to each of them. Before he passed away, he sent for the finest jeweler and paid him to make two rings that were identical to the original one. The jeweler did that, and before he died, the man gave each son one of the rings without telling him about the other two. After a while, the three sons discovered that each of them had been given a ring. So they went before a local judge to help them decide who had the magical ring. The judge carefully scrutinized each ring, but could not tell them apart. The judge declared, "We shall know who has the magic ring when we observe the direction your life takes." Each of the three brothers then acted as if he had the magic ring by being gracious, kind, and generous. The brothers were transformed by the gift of the ring and their intention to live into that gift. It was not the magic of the ring that changed their lives, but rather their acceptance of their father's gift to them. Jesus Christ is not magic, but God's gift of him to us, if received and valued, can and will change our lives. We will be a new and transformed people.

- IV. It is quiet in Bethlehem tonight. We, just like the shepherds, are leading our lives day to day doing what it is we need to do. We, like the shepherds, are not always prepared for the coming of Christ into our lives. We, also like the shepherds, have an opportunity to take Him into ourselves and be transformed by His love. And we, like the shepherds, are invited to go forth and proclaim him by the way we live, the way we love, and the way we give the gift of Christ in ourselves to others. *Amen.*