

## **Christmas Is All About Surprises<sup>1</sup>**

The Reverend Michael La Cagnina

December 24, 2009 - Christmas Eve

Dear friends in Christ,

Grace to you and peace...especially peace...on this night when we celebrate our Savior's birth.

Well here we are - another Christmas Eve. And we have all heard the Christmas story told again and again through:

- Children's pageants,
- Lyrics of Christmas carols,
- Large and small Nativity scenes,
- Christmas Greeting cards,
- Priests' sermons,
- And other ways as well.

For many of us, especially us old-timers, this story is well-trodden ground. At every point we know what comes next. Yet something that is so familiar, can contain within it unexpected depths.

And while tonight is about travelling over ground upon which we have already trod, tonight is also a night of surprises. In fact, in our modern expression of Christmas, I would say that Christmas is all about surprises. Think about it;

- There are the surprises that await us in packages under the Christmas tree or under the bed waiting to be unwrapped.
- The surprise visits that we receive from family or friends who travel long distances and then knock on our doors and say, "SURPRISE!"
- And then there's the different kind of surprise, such as the one where a man approached a clerk at TJMax and asked for a small bottle of expensive perfume for his wife. The clerk asked, "Is it a surprise?" The man answered, "It sure is, she's expecting a trip to Hawaii."

Christmas is indeed all about surprises.

How surprised do you think Mary was when the angel Gabriel told her that she would conceive and bear a son, and he would be the Savior of the world? She was so surprised, she asked. "How can this be?"

And look at Joseph's reaction when the angel told him that his fiancée was pregnant; he was both shocked and angry... until the angel told him the rest of the story.

And what about Elizabeth and Zacharias? When the angel announced to Zacharias that Elizabeth, his very old wife, would bear a child, Zacharias laughed in disbelief and the angel sealed his mouth until the baby was circumcised and named John as the angel foretold.

---

<sup>1</sup> Reference: Luke 2:1-20

And imagine Elizabeth's astonishment when she learned from the angel that their child would be the one to announce the arrival of the Messiah, for whom the world had waited for a thousand years.

Truly this is a season of surprises. But imagine, if you can, the poor lowly shepherds out in the fields watching over their sheep. Some keeping a watchful eye over the flock, others napping during their off shift, and suddenly, angels appeared to them and announced the birth of the Son of God.

That would have to be a "WOW!" kind of surprise. After all, they were lowly shepherds, uneducated for the most part, perhaps a bit irreligious, probably uncouth, and the most unlikely to be targets of such an announcement. Yet, surprise above all surprises, they were the first to receive the birth announcement.

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not..." Now imagine that you are one of those shepherds... your response is liable to be similar to Bill Cosby's, "RIIIIGHT!"

Garrison Keillor suggests that they hugged the ground in fear, and he could be right. But the angel persisted, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

Now if that is not surprise enough, what happens next is indeed surprising. When the angels departed, the shepherds got together and decided to go to Bethlehem to check this out. These hard working shepherds who risk life and limb for the safety of the flock, are now going to drive their flock to Bethlehem, at night, to check this out?

Not only did they go, but Luke says that "...they came with haste..." And what did they find? "...they found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger..." just as the angels had told them they would.

But what does all of this mean to us today on the brink of 2010, over 2000 years since that Holy Night?

We live in an age where shepherds have all but disappeared from our world;

An age when the town of Bethlehem instead of being a place of peace, is an epicenter of conflict and bitterness,

An age when electronic announcements, whether truthful or not, circle the globe faster than the shepherds travelled to Bethlehem.

An age when we seem to do everything with such great haste that we fail to pause and consider if there is any room for Jesus in our lives.

What does it all mean to us...today...in this present age?

Three things, I think.

First is that Jesus still wants to come into the lives of plain and ordinary people, the shepherds of this age. After all, the shepherds of Jesus' time were not rocket scientists, they weren't Sunday school teachers, or Nobel Prize winners, or Kings, or Presidents. They were common folk, whose lives were filled with menial tasks and significant challenges, and often, they were just trying to survive.

To paraphrase one of my favorite comic strip characters; and I know I'll date myself with this, but, as Pogo said, "We have met the shepherds and they are us!"

Nothing special. Nothing extraordinary. But...and watch out for that three letter word, it is the biggest eraser of all time, for it erases everything you said leading up to it.

For example, what would I be telling my wife if I said to her, "Honey you look great, but ...". Regardless how I finish that statement, I have just told her that she doesn't look great. I learned that sometime during our first year of marriage. I rarely use that word anymore.

Getting on with our story, we all are as the shepherds, for none of us are special or extraordinary, yet we are chosen by God to receive the biggest gift imaginable.

**"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."**

I am confident that there are many here tonight whose lives are hard. Some may be wondering, "Where is my life headed?" Or perhaps you are wondering if anything you do counts for anything. Maybe you wonder if God hears your prayers. And to you, I can only say, "Welcome to the shepherds' guild, friend. A Savior has been born for you tonight."

And that is the First thing that the surprises of Christmas bring to mind for us in the close of the year 2009, and that is that Jesus still wants to come into the lives of plain and ordinary people, folks such as I, folks such as you.

The second has to do with fear. **"Fear not..."** the angel said. That's a pretty tall order for today. We live in an age:

- When we are reminded of threats of total annihilation by "code orange."
- When we have to practically strip to bare necessities to get on airplanes.
- When loved ones face illness and we are forced to turn them over to the care of those marvelous angel-like people at hospice.
- When money is tight and the fear of losing one's house is a real threat.
- When dreams are fading at a rate that is higher than our hopes can sustain.
- When relationships are strained.

These are all things that cause us to fear. To be afraid is to be human. To simply say **"Fear not..."** just doesn't cut it!

But beloved of God, that's not what the angel said. **"Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."**

**"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."**

Fear not ...I bring you GREAT news...there is born to YOU a Savior.

You see, God sent His Savior Jesus to us. And through Jesus and the Comforter, His Holy Spirit, who followed, God is here in this fractured world. God is here in every country, city, village and crossroad. Wherever there is anyone in pain, distress, agony, suffering loss, hurting in anyway, God is there. God is in the dark nights and the hopeless situations. And God promises never to abandon us; He will be with us

whenever we call upon Him. And even more than that, God has promised us that because Jesus came into the world, and we have received Him into our hearts, we will live forever. His love for us can overcome our fears, for our fears are temporal and His love is everlasting.

The third and the final thing is this; the shepherds went to Bethlehem.

They didn't have to go. The angels didn't command it; God didn't require it. But the invitation was offered. *“this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger..”* The shepherds went straight to Bethlehem, not to see if it was true, but because they believed it was.

They knew that the world had suddenly changed, and they wanted to celebrate that fact. And I think that's why we are here tonight. Some may have come because your spouse or another loved one required your presence. Or maybe your children laid a guilt trip on you. That's okay; we're just glad you're here! But most have come because, just as the shepherds, you believe the message of the angels. A Savior has been born, one who will bridge the gap between a sinful world and a gracious God. So we've come. God has touched us with a promise that has taken root in our hearts. That though we are ordinary...that though we are sinful shepherds...a Savior has been born for us, and we have a reason to celebrate.

Thanks be to God.

May each of you enjoy a truly blessed Christmas!

Amen.