

The Love of Hope; or the Hope of Love?
The Gospel of St. Luke 2:8-21

(January 1, 2017)

New Year's Day is a time of hope, a time of rejuvenation—even if the only things we rejuvenate are the same resolutions that we started out with last year, and the year before that; and maybe even the year before *that*. If you can remember anything beyond that, you were probably born in the 21st century, since the memory cells of those of us born in the 20th century don't take us much past the last decade.

Yet human beings continue to be hopeful beings. Hope, it seems, is part of our hard-drive. In short, we love to hope. In Dante's *Inferno*, even the damned must be commanded to “*abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here*”—a phrase, ironically, that many a pessimistic seminary student would mutter as we entered our Greek and Hebrew Classes, forging our way through ancient, foreign grammars and alphabets.

The more optimistic among us were fond of another literary phrase, “Hope springs eternal.” But the full text of Alexander Pope's stanza reads “Hope springs eternal in the human breast: Man never is, but always *to be* blest: The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home, Rests and expatiates in a life to come.”

And who could blame the uneasy souls of these Bethlehem shepherds for feeling as if they had to look far into the future for their hope? Not only were they and the rest of Judea living under the peaceful but oppressive Roman government; but even in their own culture, shepherds were disdained, such a dirty and distrusted crew that they were not viewed as reliable witnesses in court. The mighty days of David, who had tended his own flock on that same hill, must have seemed to them distant and indistinct indeed.

And tonight, they were simply doing what they had had to do countless days and nights before: Stay on the alert. For both in brain and body, sheep are completely defenseless. (A reputation, by the way, which continues even into today's technological world: “sheeple” is used to describe those folks on the internet who blindly follow a celebrity or the latest fad in pop culture.)

Although not moving their helpless herd during that night to look for grazing, the shepherds would still need to fend off both human and animal predators that had mutt on their minds. This is why the Psalmist says, in speaking of the Lord as *his* shepherd, that His rod was a comfort. Phillip Keller, himself a modern day shepherd tells of the time when he was in the Middle East with a young sheep herder. As they walked round the herd, deep in conversation, suddenly the wooden rod of the boy shot out as he smashed a viper that was slithering through the scant grass toward the sheep.

And on that night, the stout rods of the Bethlehem shepherds were clutched in their hands as they were on the alert for any sudden motion. On the alert, on the alert, always—on the alert.....

And suddenly—there WAS a flash of movement, not in the grass below, but in the last place they expected: Up, above, in the heavens--no longer star-lit, but illuminated by a brilliant and blinding supernatural being who froze them in place with terror. Scholars think this creature hovering in the cosmos was the mighty messenger Gabriel—which would have been enough to collapse anybody's courage (and knees). But next the text tells us that it was not the glory of Gabriel, but “the glory of the Lord “ that “shone round about them.”

Now the glory of the Lord was more than simply high-wattage illumination, like the stadium scoreboard at night. The glory, the justice, the majesty, the purity—the intense and burning love—that is the glory of the Lord, was such that with even a tiny glimmer of it, the face of Moses shone for days from its distant and indirect reflection.

Why did God's glory thus appear? Because the nexus of all history, the fulcrum point on which it rests, was occurring at very precise moment in time. *That* night—which had seemed like any other night for hundreds of shepherds on that hill for hundreds of years—was the night broken into, as the Kingdom of God broke through and made itself known to the Kingdom of man—in a way that had never been seen before.

For the Scriptures tell us that this fiery and glittering messenger from God came with great news: that the Savior of mankind, from itself and from its sin—the Messiah, the Lord of all, God incarnate—had been born that night. Now, let us pause here for a moment.

The shepherds may, of course, have been aware that the birth of the Messiah was to be in the city of David. But as to the timing, there had been no warning at all, nor of a more specific location. So in the split second following the angel's announcement about the birth *of* Christ, the shepherds may have been forming thoughts about the *where* of his birth—probably at the temple, or possibly at the residence of their puppet king, Herod.

But those just-forming assumptions were shattered and corrected with the angel's next words, whose authority could not be doubted: “This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

In a manger? Had the message come from anybody but Gabrielle, the sheep herders might have wondered if they heard it clearly. For, if, today, faulty humans are able to use a GPS to more or less find specific addresses, surely this supernatural being could have given the sheperds a more precise location. Even though the baby's description of being in a manger must have narrowed down the possibilities—especially for agricultural workers like the shepherds—there must have still been quite a few barns and stables to

check out.

And in the middle of the night. Most of Bethlehem's citizens literally went to bed when their chickens did—because burning lamps were both expensive and dangerous. So until the Christ child was found, the owner of every manger in this rural town was roused from his slumber with an amazing tale by babbling shepherds who had actually *left their sheep*—their very livelihood—in their urgent search.

And what about the other part of the angel's description? Those swaddling cloths? That would have come as no surprise to the shepherds, for even today in the Middle East, the practice of swaddling, or wrapping a baby in strips of cloth to keep the child from flailing about, is not uncommon: Any other newborn in Bethlehem that night would have been wrapped in the same way.

But any other newborn in Bethlehem that night was not God Incarnate. Let this sink in: the creator of the Universe had allowed himself not only to be born into the human race as other humans are born, becoming part of a very messy and painful process—but he now allowed himself to be completely bound up in cloth; unable to make even a single voluntary move of his own volition. He was now utterly and totally vulnerable—both physically and culturally, for it would not escape the notice of those who knew Joseph and Mary that their child had been born before nine months after their marriage.

Yet is this not surely how we ourselves show ultimate love, by becoming completely vulnerable, risking rejection, even as we are hoping, hoping for acceptance? How could Gabrielle and the angels, or any of us, do anything but wonder at this breath-taking risk of God—the giver of every human breath—who allowed himself to now be wrapped in restrictive bands as a newborn baby.

What Gabriel was thus describing, the Creator of the Universe rendered completely helpless and vulnerable, was not so much a sign for the shepherds, but a sign for us: God is willing to go to incredible lengths to reach us.

Who knows how long the shepherds search may have taken—for, unlike the Magi who would follow later, they had no guiding star. But we can safely assume that by the time they found the Holy Family, quite a few *other* families in Bethlehem had been awakened, and been left wondering at what in Heaven's name was going on. But at last the shepherds were successful, and reached their destination.

And here let us pause yet again, and ponder what the shepherds would have seen at that moment of discovery.

Mangers are typically found in stables or barns, or at least in some place where the animals can be sheltered as they feed. Having grown up on a farm myself, I can tell you that they are not the most hygienically sterile of environments. There is dirt. There is

dust. There is manure of a variety of types, none of them pleasant to smell.

Moreover, most of these animals were destined themselves to be slaughtered to feed humans; and in *their* feeding trough, the Son of God was laid, mewling and most likely miserable. Nor is it probable that there were orderly stalls for each lowing, mooing, clucking creature there, to keep them out of the way as the Christ child was born. Even today, in the best of modern medical circumstances, child birth is still dangerous—such a rustic setting as this would have driven any modern doctor, nurse, or midwife clinically crazy.

But there was no doctor, no nurse, no midwife: Only an exhausted teenager, sweaty with the agonizing pain and bodily filth of childbirth; and her perplexed and distressed husband, wondering how to keep his wife and child alive, fed, and warm. He thinks he hears running feet at the entrance of the shelter, and looks up—just as the shepherds peer in. And there—the sheep herders beheld the Lamb of God, whose ultimate sacrifice their own animals, raised for temple offerings, had foreshadowed for centuries. Thus was initiated, at that very precise point in place and time, Christ's kingdom on earth.

Now, a very significant question to ask at this point is, “What did the shepherds do next?” Turn around and leave the family without food, warmth, care, or comfort? That would have been cruel to *any* family, let alone this one, about whom the heavenly host had lit up the Bethlehem skies proclaiming.

Perhaps it is such an obvious point that St. Luke, always an efficient writer, thought we could read it between the lines: But as the shepherds rushed off to *tell* the good news of Christ's kingdom on earth, they had to also *be* the good news of Christ's kingdom on earth: to minister to the needs of these three people who were hurting and helpless—which, I suspect, was part of God's plan that night. For if angels were sent to minister to Christ's physical needs some years later at the end of his temptation, they certainly could have descended from the skies over Bethlehem at the time of his birth, and done the same thing.

But there is no mention of angelic assistance that night. Instead, it is not impossible that all those bewildered and grumpy householders whom the shepherds had roused a first time, heard yet again beatings at their doors, as the same men returned, pleading for blankets, for water, for food, for anything anything they could find to make the exhausted couple more comfortable. We can only hope that Mary and Joseph did not have to spend a second night in an animal shelter—thanks to Christ's very first friends on earth, the shepherds of Bethlehem.

It is likely our Lord heard this story from his parents many times as he was growing up; and during His ministry, perhaps it was these very shepherds whom he remembered when he responded to the question, “...Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite

you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?”

St. Matthew records that Christ's answer was simply, “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” – “The King will reply”: A king born in filth and poverty, rescued by those despised within their own society.

And now, quite logically, Christ the King asks *us* to follow his example in bringing forward his kingdom on earth: To feed the hungry, bring water to the thirsty, to minister to those who are sick, in soul, mind, or body; or who are in prison; to bring clothes to those who have none; or to simply invite into our homes those who may feel like strangers.

Many here have followed this example, as homelessness and a lack of jobs and food have come to our notice through Family Promise, Open Door, the ministries in Kenya, and other community and missionary services. And these physical needs in our world which Christ lists are clear and urgent and must be addressed.

But there is one need that may almost slip our notice: Taking in the stranger. And that takes some thought. For not only are there refugees fleeing dangers and dictators from around the world; but who among us has never felt himself or herself to be a stranger at times, even among loved ones? All of us, every human being in the world, longs to be invited in and loved by the God who knows them fully, yet loves them completely. Because in that one instant of time, over a period of perhaps thirty years, the world witnessed the perfect love of Christ starting to God's world perfect, whole, and lovely again. And we yearn to be part of that process—we long for that perfect world.

That God would do this through the fallen human race He created and then joined is an indication of how far this risk-taking Creator is willing to go in loving and redeeming the people and the world He so delighted in designing and bringing to life: For He has taken the very serious risk of not only *loving* us, (and risking rejection) but of loving *through* us—imperfect human beings who are each strangers in a foreign and fallen land. But that is how, long ago, at His very birth, Christ showed us through the shepherds that we are to share the good news: Not only by telling of the love of Christ, but *being* the love of Christ.

Which means, of course, that we must be out in the world He has created and which he still loves. But as our final verse shows us, though we are to love the world with the love of Christ, we are not to love the *ways* of the world. Which does not mean we cannot enjoy the pleasures he has provided for us here—but we must realize that they are passing pleasures—and that our first love must always be focused on Christ Himself, the source of our love. That is why St. Luke is also careful to mention a ceremony that any Jewish reader would have taken for granted, that of the circumcision of Christ, which in

the church is also celebrated today, and which represents a separation from the ways of the world, and a commitment to God.

So as we ponder our New Year's resolutions, perhaps, in 2017, they should be measured not so much in how we better ourselves by the pounds or swear words or time on the internet we drop; but rather, by

how we share our food with those who are hungry; by how we offer words of love and encouragement to those who are hurting; and by how we turn computer time into compassion time, reaching out and inviting those who feel like strangers, into our homes and into our hearts.

For as the shepherds showed us two thousand years ago at his birth, it is with this practical and sacrificial love that Christ's kingdom is built. For it is not the human love of hope that will save the world; but the hope of Christ's eternal love, through us and for us, both now, and when He comes again.
