

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2011
Christ the King
Kenner, LA

Let's Go See

Text: Luke 2:1-20

I would have been terrified too. That's why just about every time angels show up in the Bible, they have the same predictable effect on people. So before they can say anything else, they have to begin with the words, "Do not be afraid." That's what the angel said to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptizer, when he appeared to him, even though he was a priest, serving in the temple. Six months later, Gabriel had to say the same thing to Mary, "Do not be afraid. The Lord is with you." And thirty some years later, when a group of women went to the tomb on Easter Sunday expecting to anoint the body of the crucified Lord, they found an angel there instead, whose first words were, you guessed it, "Do not be afraid." There's a pattern in the Bible of folks being frightened by the appearance of angels. Wouldn't you be?

But being startled by an angel wasn't the highlight of the evening for these unsuspecting shepherds. Because suddenly, in addition to that, "the glory of the Lord shone around them."

What would *that* be like? The "glory of the Lord" is that bright cloud-like sign of God's presence which settled on the top of Mt. Sinai, and which led the Israelites into the promised land as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, the glory of God is what descended upon

and filled Solomon's temple during its dedication, making all the worshippers run for cover. The shepherds had only heard about this phenomenon from the past, the famous "shekinah" as it's called in Hebrew, the cloud of God's glory. Yet here it was, surrounding them, and they were terrified. Rightfully so. But even that rare glimpse of the glory of the Lord wasn't the highlight of the evening. No.

Would you have believed there was even more to come? Someone could have flagged the angels for piling on, because suddenly there was a "multitude of the heavenly host" (quick, how many in a multitude, does anybody know? Me neither). Again, one angel would have been enough for me, but, hey, this was a special night, I understand. So why not a multitude.

But they didn't just appear. They started singing or speaking or shouting or something. We might think that they were "sweetly singing o'er the plain," but it could have been thunderous, tumultuous praise. Again, who's ever heard or seen a multitude of the heavenly host in action?!

Well, the shepherds did. But even that wasn't the highlight of their evening.

Ah, then came the angel's message itself. After all, the word "angel" means "messenger," so what was the important message? "To you is born / this day / in the city of David / a Savior who is Christ the Lord." That says it all, the what / when / where / and who of Christmas.

That's one of the two, shortest but most profound sermons on record. The other was also from an angel, years later: "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen."

It takes a life-time and then some to wrap our minds around those two messages. But even that wasn't the most memorable part of the Christmas event for the shepherds.

So, if it wasn't the frightening appearance of an angel, or the overwhelming back-up of a whole battalion of the heavenly beings, and if it wasn't their rarefied glimpse of the "glory of God" shining all around them, and if it wasn't this angelic song or shout of praise, "Glory to God in the highest," which has become the oldest part of the Church's liturgy around the world, then what was the highlight of the evening?

Well, you know very well. It came as a result of their saying to each other, "let's go see for ourselves." Or, as they put it, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." And that's what they did, leading to the real joy of that night, finding Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus."

So what's the highlight of this Christmas for you? Gathering with friends and family? Oh, yes. That's a wonderful treat. We'll have a multitude of relatives (not the heavenly host variety, but an earthly host) at our home for dinner tomorrow.

Is it hearing all the familiar Christmas music and even getting to sing some of it in church? That too is irreplaceable. I told Deborah that

singing the processional hymn on Christmas, “Oh Come All Ye Faithful,” and the processional hymn on Easter, “Jesus Christ is Risen Today,” are two of the biggest highlights of each year for me.

What will the highlight of this Christmas for you? Will it be that new smart-phone you’ve been hoping for, or that Lexus with the big red bow on it now parked in your driveway (you didn’t know about that, huh)? Well, of course the gifts are great and our loved ones spent a lot of time and effort selecting them for us, but. . . We’d never want to admit to the presents being the highlight of our celebration.

So what is? I hope it’s like the shepherds’ decision to go and see for themselves, to find out if everything you’ve heard about this Savior who is Christ the Lord is really true. Apart from all the trappings, whether angels or bright, glorious clouds. Whether we can look into a bare stable, at a newborn child, resting on a heap of hay, and fall down before him in adoration. Because that’s what the shepherds did. That was the highlight of their night and of their entire lives.

They knew that all the other special effects were used by God just to get their attention and bring them to this humble scene to meet their Lord.

This is where we gather to meet him and worship the new born king, our Savior. Like the shepherds, we’ve heard the angel’s message, “Do not be afraid.” So we come in joy and confidence instead of fear. We’ve come to hear the “Glad tidings of a great joy.” We know that we probably won’t

see the glory of God in some mysterious radiance around us, because that glory of God is now focused in Jesus, in whom, St. John says, we have seen God's glory, glory as of the only Son. And although we don't find him lying in a humble manger, we know he's present to us in earthy bread and wine. And even though we may not hear the multitude of the heavenly host just yet, we join them regularly when, "with all the choirs of angels, with the church on earth and the hosts of heaven, we" sing "glory to God in the highest" and "glory to the newborn king."

We know that the glorious love and grace of God surrounds us. That is what makes this day and all our days so extraordinary. And that is what we continue to ponder in our hearts. Not the brightness, nor the singing, nor the surprising presence of angels, but the ongoing presence of Emmanuel, God with us forever.