



**CHRISTMAS
LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

Sunday, December 22, or Wednesday December 25, 2013

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(Please see today's great music and worship recommendations in the Music and Worship Resources unit.)

Lection – Luke 2:15–20 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 15) When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” (v. 16) So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. (v. 17) When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; (v. 18) and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. (v. 19) But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. (v. 20) The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Christmas is a reminder that God is hope. Instead of giving up on the world God sent his only begotten son (John 3:16). Christmas is awe-inspiring because God sends hope to the hopeless. He not only sends the message to those who need him most, but he sends it *through* those who need him most. Christmas is about a poor family who under imperial order had to march to Bethlehem on the occasion of the birth of their firstborn son. When Jesus was born, God’s intention for him to be King was made known, not through heralding trumpets or dancing maidens, but through a lowly group of shepherds. God sent the “Good News” about the birth of the Savior *of the World* to a lowly group of shepherds working second shift in the fields outside of Bethlehem. Hallelujah!

II. Biblical Interpretation

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

It is commonly believed that Mitt Romney lost the 2012 Presidential election in part due to his secretly filmed statement in a right-wing political fundraiser where he said, “There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what. Alright, there are 47 percent who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it—that that’s an entitlement. And the government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what. . . . These are people who pay no income tax. . . . My job is not to worry about those people. I’ll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives.”¹

Mitt Romney was trying to use *fear and to drum up more disdain for the poor* to gain political support. *Fear* is a weapon used to keep marginalized communities in bondage. The goal of the conservative right wing of this country is to keep us separated by *fear* so that some of us will vote their way in elections and keep them in power. In spite of such tactics which have long been operative in politics, the Angel says, “*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 Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*”

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The angels left the most amazing scene of Jesus' birth and went back to heaven, leaving the shepherds in their place, working second shift in the fields. These shepherds were just regular low-wage working folks like today's catering workers, chefs, childcare workers, correctional officers, cosmetologists, firefighters, security guards, taxi drivers, truck drivers, farmers, and secretaries. They would be among the 47% of whom Mitt Romney spoke.

Verse 8 of this pericope says the shepherds "were keeping watch over the flock by night." These shepherds were doing manual labor caring for sheep. There are many African American and non-African Americans who can relate to doing manual labor at night. These manual laborers are the people to whom God chose to reveal the Good News. This "Good News" was not revealed to a king or to a lord, or even to the religious leaders, but to manual laborers working second shift in the fields outside of the small town of Bethlehem.

But not only were they manual laborers, but in the First-century hireling, shepherds had a bad reputation. Joachim Jeremias cites Rabbinic sources and says that "most of the time they were dishonest and thieving; they led their herds onto other people's land and pilfered the produce of the land."² Because they were often months at a time without supervision, they were often accused of stealing some of the increase of the flock. Consequently, the pious were warned not to buy wool, milk, or kids from shepherds on the assumption that it was stolen property.³ Shepherds were not allowed to fulfill a judicial office or be admitted in court as witnesses.⁴ A midrash on Psalm 23:2 reads, "There is no more disreputable occupation than that of a shepherd."⁵ Philo, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher of Alexandria (25 BC–45 AD), wrote about looking after sheep and goats, "Such pursuits are held mean and inglorious."⁶ But God still chose them.

The shepherds went in unity to see the thing that the angels had revealed to them. Throughout verses 15 through 20 there are several references to "we" and "us" and "let's go." These are the actions of folks in a union-type situation. There are always meetings and rallies in a union organization.

The shepherds found the truth "lying in a manger" (a less-than-middle-class way to be born). The Greek noun is *phatne*,⁷ "manger, crib, feeding-trough." A manger means that it was in a stable, or, as some biblical traditions indicate, in a cave. Not in a Travelodge, Red Roof Inn, or Howard Johnson's, but a cave, the kind of lodging used by commoners and peasants, working folks.

Verse 17 says, Then they made it "known . . ." Folk who are united and have something to tell make it known. In keeping with our union language, Unions have their ways of getting the word out about events that matter to them or to their members. This is why unions always have newsletters, newspapers, and flyers, and now, the Internet. These shepherds were no different. What they saw was worth getting the word out about and they did. Isn't that the thing to do at Christmas and all year round—get the word out about the one who was born in Bethlehem?

In verses 18 and 19, we see that this news was so otherworldly that people were amazed, and Mary did not share it but kept it to herself and pondered it in her heart. Mary did not speak or reply—she pondered. According to *Webster’s Dictionary*, the word ponder means “to weigh in the mind: Appraise to think about: reflect on. Mary could have responded in a variety of ways that would have made sense. Reflection certainly makes sense since Mary was a poor teenager who has just given birth to the Savior of the world.

This text concludes by saying that the shepherds returned after seeing Jesus, glorifying and praising God. These men of humble circumstances, and perhaps suspect reputations, now proclaimed to the world the “Good News.” They proclaimed the news to everyone they met. Like the woman at the well they cried, “Come see a man . . .” (John 4:1-26). Like the angels before them these shepherds may also have cried, “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14, NKJV).

Celebration

Jesus, Savior of the World, was born in a lowly manger. What does that say to all of the poor folk in the world? It says that no matter how you start, you can end up awesome and amazing. God does not only work with who the *world* considers important. 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 (NLT) says:

Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

Jesus, Savior of the World, was announced by common laborers working second shift outside of a third-rate town. Jeremiah 9:23-24 (NKJV) says:

Thus says the LORD:
“Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,
Let not the mighty man glory in his might,
Nor let the rich man glory in his riches;
But let him who glories glory in this,
That he understands and knows Me,
That I am the LORD, exercising loving kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth.
For in these I delight,” says the LORD.

Descriptive Details in This Passage

The descriptive details include, but are not limited to:

Sounds: Grass blowing in the breeze; animals chewing on straw; bleating sheep—as a kind of backdrop to the night;

Smells: Manure—the rich, pungent, earthy smell permeates everything;

Colors: Silver stars in the night sky—a dark velvet mat highlighted with twinkling stars; and

Sights: Shepherds in a field working; a manger with a newborn in it; Mary pondering; and a Union cap or shirt (this image helps makes the transition from the text to contemporary society).

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

Please see today's great music and worship recommendations in the Music and Worship Resources unit.

Notes

1. Corn, David. *Mother Jones*, September 17, 2012.
2. Jeremias, Joachim. Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus (SCM/Fortress Press, 1969), 304–305. He cites b. Sanh. 25b; Strack and Billerback II, 114; M.B.K. x.9; T.B.K. xi.9, 370; b. Ket. 62b; b.B.K. 94b Bar. Green, p. 130, disputes this analysis. Rather, he sees them merely as “peasants, located toward the bottom of the scale of power and privilege.”
3. Marshall, p. 108, too, notes that the tradition of despised shepherds is a late tradition.
4. Jeremias, TDNT 6:489.
5. Midrash Ps. 23.2, ed. Buber, Vilna 1891, 99b.12, cited by Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, p. 311, fn. 42.
6. Philo, *de agric.* 61, cited by Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, p. 311, fn. 42.
7. Swanson, James A. The Dictionary of Biblical Languages. Logos Bible software. #5764.