

“A Divine Encounter” – Lk 2:1-20 – Christmas Day, 2016

Ah, Christmas morning. We don't usually have a service on Christmas Day, but this year it works out that Christmas Day is a Sunday, and so here we are. With the carols of last night's Christmas Eve service still ringing in our ears and with all that's happening in the office and the new building it certainly was a bit of a rush to be here this morning. Thank God for His peace and strength!

Maybe it's because of all the rush and hustle and bustle of the last few days that my perspective on things is a bit sharper than usual, but I have to admit that every time I read this passage from Luke telling us about the meeting of “an angel of the Lord” and the shepherds, I am tickled, because there is a wondrous Rick Mercer (of “22 Minutes”) kind of delicious humour about the way it happened.

We have become so lulled by the Hallmark Cards depiction of this event that we miss the Gospel picture. We immediately recall lovely pastoral pictures of a hillside, nighttime (always clear skies – it's never raining nor snowing), sheep quietly grazing or nestled together to keep warm, shepherds shuffling awkwardly from one foot to the other, and even sometimes a little fire. Naturally the picture is not complete without camels and wise men and a star, and soft light from an oil lamp spilling out from the window or door of a stable in the village down in the valley. I'm sure we can all remember cards with those lovely pictures.

However, set against such pastoral touches the gospel paints a simpler, starker, yet more spectacular picture, with all the rough edges of real life. We need to strip away all the soft niceness of the Christmas card image of that night, and see it the way the gospel presents it.

Now, pause for a moment, and imagine the scene not the way Hallmark offers but instead the way the Gospel actually presents it. Shepherds, living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Shepherds – these were no gentle poster boys: they were real people, living a rough lifestyle – think logging camp, miners, or commercial fishers. Rough, tough people accustomed to a hard and difficult life of work, in this case looking after sheep. And sheep are difficult animals to look after. We think they're all cute and cuddly, but sheep are a major pain to raise – they get into trouble the moment you look away, getting stuck in bushes, rocks, fences, wherever. They are fragile creatures capable of going from healthy to sick and dying in the blink of an eye. Sheep require constant attention and work, and protection from all kinds of creatures, often even themselves!

So, in our picture, we have the shepherds, a rough, tough crowd of men, out in the fields at night. Not a pleasant gang, more like the kind of crowd you'd cross the street to avoid, especially at night. And suddenly, standing in front of them, is an angel of the Lord. Now we don't get much in the way of pictures in the gospels about angels, but from the description “the glory of the Lord shone around them” I think we can safely imagine that angels look pretty clean, pretty pure, well, sort of ‘pretty’, ‘beautiful’, ‘handsome’ if you prefer. I doubt that any of us when we think about angels conjure up an image of a short, ugly, unkempt person – think of the sleaze-bag boss, Louis DePalma, in the TV show ‘Taxi’ (played so well by Danny DeVito). And we're probably right – these messengers (which is what the word ‘angel’ means) from God probably do look pretty near perfect, whatever ‘looking perfect’ may be.

But it's the two of these together that cause me to think of a Rick Lett comedy skit – here's this rough, tough crowd of crowd of shepherds, and a perfect, glowing angel. The shock and awe must have been incredible! The impact is kind of like a drag queen suddenly appearing in the middle of a bunch of loggers coming back out of the woods, except here the fear and the trembling is all felt by the shepherds. “They were terrified”, the gospel tells us. I guess so! This is like all of the alien abduction stories from the tabloids coming true, right there on the hillside.

We cannot, we must not, let all those gentle Christmas cards wash away our appreciation for just how terrified these poor shepherds were – if we picture them as merely smiling and nodding through this event with blissful looks on their faces, we completely miss the stunning shock they felt at being in the presence of a messenger sent directly from God. It's that sense of being overwhelmed by being in the presence of the Holy that moves this story beyond amusing comedy skits; it's that meaningfulness that propels us beyond sweet Christmas cards and pushes us into the life-giving reality of the Gospels. Can

you imagine the fear, the overwhelming sense of terror at not just this one messenger from heaven appearing suddenly, the hillside lit up with an eerie glow, a few short words about a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord, and then all heaven opening up, a whole host of angels praising God. Truly a moment of glory at the beginning of the life of Jesus.

And yet the grace of the moment occurs for me right after the angel chorus. “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven ...”; now there are a thousand pictures painted with a few words! I’m moved by the moment when all were left in sudden silence, with the echoes of the angel chorus ringing only in their heads. That moment when the darkness of night returned to cloak the hills and the shepherds were left stunned by the whole event. That was the moment when they could have reassured each other that they had dreamed it all, that it must have been some bad whiskey. But – and here’s the moment of true glory – they didn’t. These rough, tough, sunburned and scarred individuals instead said simply to each other, “let’s go take a look”, and that’s what they did. They went down to Bethlehem, they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger, and they told everyone what had happened to them.

That in itself is a picture of grace and glory, too – a group of rough, tough men relating an incredible tale, and yet providing the credibility through their very being in the presence of the Holy Child whose birth had been announced to them. All who heard them were amazed at what the shepherds told them – I guess so! It’s an amazing story, made even more amazing by the incongruity of these shepherds themselves becoming angels of sorts, messengers bringing the news of a heavenly heralding of this good news, the birth of a Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord. What did it mean? What could it mean? The shepherds, and the world, including Mary, would have to wait another three decades before it would all come clear, but there could be no mistake that the birth of this child marked the glorious beginning of something, and while Mary treasured and pondered all these words in her heart I’m sure that others did as well, not the least being the shepherds.

It was a glorious beginning indeed, and it continued. The shepherds returned, not merely reminiscing about what had happened, but glorifying and praising God for all that had happened, changed forever by their encounter with the divine. That’s the conclusion of this story in the text, but surely it was not the end for the shepherds – it was just a beginning for them, a glorious beginning of a new life in their faith.

And that is perhaps the most important reason why we need to let ourselves move past the Christmas card views of this story, to move beyond simplistic, even bizarrely humorous views of this story, and to have it come alive in the way the gospel tells it. You see, this is a story of God reaching down to touch humanity, and it is the least likely of humanity who were favoured. The moment of God’s arriving to be one with people did not happen first to royalty, to kings, to the important. It was not a moment of the spectacular descending of a golden city to grace the already-richly-blessed. The least likely – an older, barren wife; a young virgin; a scruffy collection of shepherds – it was they who were favoured as the recipients of the declaration of the Son of God arriving to reconcile the world to God. It was this tiny group of the least likely candidates who were the starring participants in this world-shaking event.

What does that mean for us, that is was the least likely who were favoured by God? It means that the rest of the least likely, and that certainly includes you and me, not only can be but have been and continue to be favoured by God. The purely righteous have no need of God’s saving act in Christ Jesus – it is those of us who are weak, who are fragile, who are imperfect for whom the Son of God was born in that far-away and long-ago stable. It is to the least likely, to us, that the angel of God announces “Glory to God in the highest heavens, and on earth peace to those whom he favours.”

Peace to you, favoured ones. Savour the peace of this Christmas Day, and rejoice in being one of the least likely, the very ones our Lord Jesus Christ came to save. And then, like the shepherds, go forth, rejoicing and glorifying and praising God.