

FIRST IMPRESSIONS CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT
Isaiah 9: 1-6 Psalm 96 Titus 2: 11-14 Luke 2: 1-14
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The appearance of the angel to the shepherds in the fields is a staple of every Christmas pageant. Children know the angel's lines almost by heart, "Don't be afraid..." After calming the frightened shepherds, the angel continues to address them and you can hear the fourth graders reciting the next familiar line, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom God's favor rests."

Did you notice the variation from the older version of those lines which we still remember from when we had our parts in the school Christmas pageant? We used to say, "... peace to those of goodwill." Which made it sound like the shepherds fell under that rubric – "people of good will." It was as if the good news of the savior's birth would bring a gift of peace to those already properly disposed people of "good will" only.

But no one at the time of Jesus's birth would have held the shepherds in high regard. Let's not make a quaint holy card out of this gospel scene. The very nature of their work and their itinerancy meant that shepherds lived a non-observant lifestyle. People would not have counted them among the devout or pious. They were here today and gone tomorrow and if something were missing, they would most likely get the blame.

If we are still using the older version of the Nativity play for our school pageants we need to make sure we change the important line to fit our revised, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom God's favor rests." For this rendition fits more closely with the way Luke's gospel will unfold. Throughout this gospel the least likely will be the recipients of the good news, The shepherds may have been unlikely candidates to be the first to receive the news of God's gracious gesture towards humanity, but they knew a good thing when they heard it. There they were, going about their work, "keeping night watch over their flock." They weren't praying or reciting memorized Bible verses. Still, they find themselves surrounded by the divine light for no other reason than God having decided to extend favor to them. On them God's favor rests. In this gospel the

misfits and the outcasts are offered salvation, and they seize it. They know a good thing when they hear it.

God is the source of all goodness; is well disposed towards us and, as we experience in tonight's Christmas gospel, is once again reaching out to all of us.

Tonight's passage from Isaiah is a poetic gem. But the lovely language doesn't cover up the agony behind the lines; it underlines it. A prophet is appealing to the people who have, "dwelt in the land of gloom," pressed down by "the yoke that burdened them..." under "the rod of their taskmaster." This is poetic language that highlights the pain of an enslaved people.

But now their condition is changing, they "have seen a great light." God is acting on their behalf and is the source of their "abundant joy and great rejoicing." How wonderful to experience God's deliverance! If God can deliver us from trouble now, we need to promise ourselves to remember God's gracious action so that the next time we "walk in darkness" or dwell "in the land of gloom" we will be encouraged by our memory of God's past help.

We are celebrating our God who delivered the people in the past and is doing it again decisively tonight. Once and for all the gloom is lifted, for light has pierced our darkness. The child born to us is a sign that God is actively working on our behalf. We will need to remember all this, especially when gloom descends again and we feel unworthy of God's goodness. But this celebration tonight isn't about how God rewards us for being "people of good will." Rather, it's about God's goodwill already proven to us in the birth of the child Isaiah promised. What was gloom and darkness has turned into festivity and celebration. As we proclaim in our Psalm Response, "Sing to the Lord a new song."

Our religious language can sound abstract. Words like "salvation," "redemption," "Kingdom of God." "Grace" is one of those words; hard to visualize or describe, not only to nonbelievers, but even to devout Christians. The Old Testament is the story of grace, God freely reaching out to lift up the enslaved and continually forgiving the sinner. As if that weren't enough, tonight we celebrate how far God is willing to go to show us what grace looks like.

Paul puts it succinctly in the opening line of tonight's second reading when he says, "The grace of God has appeared...." In case grace seems too intangible and

hard to describe, God has put a human face on grace—Jesus Christ. Again, Paul sums it up, “... who gave himself for us to deliver us.” What is the effect of the appearance of grace in Jesus? People who are weighed down by their sin are “cleansed.” As a result, we become a new people, whom Paul describes as “eager to do what is good.” How did that change happen in us? Well, to repeat, “the grace of God has appeared.”

QUOTABLE

The glow of Christmas does not fend off the misery, the uncertainty, the anxiety, the confusion of the world. Catholics have never thought it did. For the mystery of evil, Christmas offers no philosophical explanation. Rather, Christmas tells a story that points us to the conclusions that because of God’s passionate and unconditional lover for us, the ultimate ending, the final word will be joyful, not despairing; happy, not sad. Christmas validates our hope. And in the words of composer Gerry Herman, “We need a little Christmas, now.”
—Retired Bishop Joseph Gossman, Raleigh, N.C.

PRAYER OF BLESSING OF A CHRISTMAS MANGER OR NATIVITY SCENE

God of every nation and people,
from the very beginning of creation
you have made manifest your love:
when our need for a Savior was great
you sent your Son to be born of the Virgin Mary.
To our lives he brings joy and peace,
justice, mercy and love.

Lord,
Bless all who look upon this manger;
may it remind us of the humble birth of Jesus,
and raise up our thought to him,
who is God-with-us and Savior of all,
and who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

Amen

(from, THE BOOK OF BLESSINGS, (Collegeville: the Liturgical Press, 1989)
page 587.

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. "Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today's Gospel reading:

The angel said to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid,
for behold I proclaim to you
good news of great joy
that will be for all people."

Reflection:

Throughout Luke's gospel the least likely will be the recipients of the good news, The shepherds may have been unlikely candidates to be the first to receive the news of God's gracious gesture towards humanity, but they knew a good thing when they heard it.

So, we ask ourselves:

- Can you name the least likely place within you, the place that feels unworthy of God's goodness?
- Can you welcome the God of graciousness there and receive the "good news of great joy?"

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

Why does the church care about immigration policies?

The Catholic Church has historically held a strong interest in immigration and how public policy affects immigrants seeking a new life in the United States. Based on Scriptural and Catholic social teachings, as well as her own experience as an immigrant Church in the United States, the Catholic Church is compelled to raise her voice on behalf of those who are marginalized and whose God-given rights are not respected.

The Church believes that current immigration laws and policies have often led to the undermining of immigrants' human dignity and have kept families apart. The existing immigration system has resulted in a growing number of persons in this country in an unauthorized capacity, living in the shadows as they toil in jobs that would otherwise go unfilled. Close family members of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents must wait years for a visa to be reunited. And our nation's

border enforcement strategies have been ineffective and have led to the death of thousands of migrants.

The Church has a responsibility to shine the message of God on this issue and help to build bridges between all parties so that an immigration system can be created that is just for all and serves the common good, including the legitimate security concerns of our nation.

---from the "Justice for Immigrants Webpage,"

CHRISTMAS GIFTS FOR DEATH ROW INMATES

Our local Catholic Worker Community, "Nazareth House," ministers to death row inmates, their families and victims' families. Each year the community coordinates the purchase of holiday packages for people living on death row. Many of the 162 inmates have no one else – family, pen pal or friend – to do so. Since the inmates are not allowed to receive homemade goods, everything sent to them has to be purchased through a special holiday program.

If you would like to make a Christmas contribution send a check payable to "Nazareth House" and write "Holiday Packages" in the memo line.

Mail to: Nazareth House, 2720 Poole Road, Raleigh, NC 27610

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

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