

A Christmas Crossing Luke 2:1-20

Robert W. Bertram

[Printed in Currents in Theology and Mission 6, No. 6 (December, 1979): 344-351.
Reprinted with permission.]

Isn't it so: Christmas would hardly be Christmas without some word from us about the Lucan Nativity Story? Correction: Christmas would hardly be Christmas without some word from the Nativity Story about *us*. The Story is not just about shepherds and flocks and angels, at least not just about those shepherds and flocks way back there and then. It is about us, too, here and now, today's shepherds and flock—and maybe as today's angels. It is our situation as well, not only Luke's or his readers', that the Story needs to re-Word. True, it was for those original readers, and about them, that the Story was first intended. It is just as much a fact of history, however, that in the meantime we too have become the Story's readers, whether Luke intended that or not. But that means then that the Story now has to be big enough to be about us, too, and must be so read. So send not to ask for whom the Story tells. It tells for thee.

That is more easily said than done. Just consider the gaps between that first Christmas and ourselves, beginning with the historical gap. When that obscure Evangelist (pretend his name was Luke and that it was a he) wrote about such antiquities as Bethlehem and Caesar Augustus and this strange birth and the frightening epiphany and the heavenly chorus—not to mention his cryptic Greek puns and Old Testament allusions to his hidden agenda toward the Roman authorities or his novel use of apocalyptic—he was obviously writing about a far different world from our own. The way to close this historical gap, so it would seem, is for us to learn historically more and more about that elusive past. The irony is, precisely as we do that—and we have no choice but to do it—we only discover the more how vastly unlike, really how unintelligible, Luke's world is to ours.

In fact, this “historicist dilemma”—the more nearly we explain the past, the less nearly we understand it—has been so paralyzing that it tempts us to overlook an even worse gap between the Story and ourselves. Beyond the merely “horizontal” gap between then-and-there and here-and-now looms that other, that “vertical” gap: between the incredible Story, on the one hand, and human incredulity *of any age*, on the other. That gap is a constant, not a variable. That enduring gap, the ten-foot-pole of unbelief, was as wide for the people of Luke's day, and presumably for Luke himself, as it is for us. That gap, being perennial, is not closable by increased historical explanation.

For that matter, the problem of historical distance does show some sign nowadays of being alleviated. There had been a tendency to make that horizontal gap worse than it needed to be, by psychologizing the problem. From Schleiermacher through Dilthey to Bultmann the historical question which predominated was, “What exactly did Luke or his readers *have in mind*? How can we with *our* understanding grasp what *they* were understanding?” But recent efforts—such as Gadamer's and Ricoeur's broadened, more “objective” views of hermeneutics or Pannenberg's view of “universal history”—have helped to refocus the question: not only what *did* this text in its original situation mean to its first authors and editors and readers (that too) but also, now that

they have objectified the Story in writing for subsequent tradition, what *does* the text mean enduringly as it comes to us today?

However, these new and welcome efforts to relieve the impasse of historicism still do nothing to close that other, vertical gap. Indeed, a major advantage of these recent efforts is that they enable us to give precedence to that prior problem, that persistent abyss between the Story's sheer unbelievability in face of perennial human unbelief. With respect to that gap, as I mentioned, Luke's first readers and his readers today come down on the same side of the divide. They and we still enter the Story at the same starting point.

I. Diagnosis

If all of us, regardless of when and where, enter the Story with a common problem, how does the story—precisely by means of this long ago event in Luke 2:1-20—diagnose what our universal problem is? “Diagnose,” I confess, is a pun on the Greek, implying that we are being “seen through”—you know by whom!—and what is so mortifying, that we ourselves must participate in seeing him see through us. Later, in the “prognosis”—a word which patristic Greek used for divine providence—the Story turns to how that same One (not “sees through” us but) “sees us through”.

I am tempted to apologize for breaking up the Story into two such separate steps, one at a time, first diagnosis and only then prognosis. As if Christians could not appreciate the solution until they had first faced the full depth of the problem. Granted, that would be a pietistic fallacy, although there is also an important half-truth in that. As Reinhold Niebuhr taught us, nothing is so out-of-place as an answer where there was not first a question. Still, it is like-wise true (as my colleague, George Hoyer, once quoted a patient as saying), ‘I didn’t know how sick I was until I got better.’ In other words, even the problem cannot truly be grasped except by hindsight from the recovery. What enables penitents to weep over their sin is not the accusation as much as the absolution.

Then why separate diagnosis from prognosis as though they were mutually exclusive? After all, aren’t Christians both sinful and righteous, both diagnosed and prognosed simultaneously—*simul*? Indeed we are, *as Christians*. In Christ our problem is a solved problem, sin is forgiven sin. But Christ, as he pointed out, is not our only option, not ever. Our constantly tempting alternative, frequently overpowering, is to try instead to make it on our own—in short, Christlessness. In that isolated condition—although admittedly we have only Christ’s word for this—our problem suddenly recoils into the dramatic opposite of his solution, no longer a stage on the way to that solution, not the beginning of a story which ends happily with prognosis, but a malignant problem pure and simple, terminal. In that condition of unfaith we have no story, no beginning, just an end—just one side, the far side of the vertical gap.

Only as in Christ we re-cross that gap—which as Christians we also do, repeatedly—do we have a story at all. Then what was our irreconcilable antithesis to his solution, our dead-end problem, once more becomes sublimated into something quite different and benign, a problem on its way to being solved. Our crossing, from this perennial problem to its diametrically opposite solution, *is* the Story—again and again. The very structure of the Gospel as story, a story for participants and not spectators, requires that problem and solution be opposed as the night is to the day.

A. Preliminary Diagnosis: “Night”

Then what is that perennial problem as this Lucan infancy narrative diagnoses—sees through—us its readers? Whatever that problem is, whatever it all is, it had best be disclosed to us only gradually, inch by inch. To plunge us immediately to the very bottom of the human tragedy would simply demand of our credulity too much too fast, so taxing is the truth of it. For isn't it the way of our disbelief, when up against that hard truth, to protest, “People may be badly off but they're not as badly off as all that?” Or more likely, we dutifully assent to the diagnosis out of churchly etiquette so as not to have to think about the painful matter ourselves. Yet theological method does have to sympathize with that reality and, when possible, adjust to it pastorally. To unload the whole truth all at once is like trying to fill a water glass with the faucet on full force. For that matter, if human incredulity has trouble with the Christian diagnosis, imagine what it will be like with the prognosis: People may be well off, but they're never as well off as all that.

So, gently does it. What according to this Lucan story is the trouble, at least for starters? Since it is the shepherds whose trouble is directly spoken to—really the story is almost as much about them as it is about the Baby—they are the members of the cast with whom we first identify. What their problem is is suggested by the help they get: “An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them...” (v. 9) They were sorely in need of illumination, light, much more of it than they would have bargained for. By the same Lucan metaphor, they needed sight. It was not enough for them that the angel's announcement be heard. It had to be “seen” as well (vv. 15, 17, 20) with a special visual “sign” to make sure they “found” it. (vv.12, 16)

The shepherd's immediate problem, in short, is that they were in the dark. Come to think of it, isn't that how they had been described from the outset? Recall, it was “at night” that they were guarding their flock. (v. 8) Superficial reading of Luke-Acts tells us that for this evangelist “night”—like darkness, shadows, blindness, stupor—is not a neutral physical description of the time of day or even a psychological description of natural ignorance. No, as Zechariah sings in the chapter preceding, “those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” are in mortal peril. (1:79) But what is that “night” which menaces the flock—the flock of Israel? the Christian flock?—and against which their shepherds must keep guard?

No one epitomizes that encroaching lethal darkness against which Jesus himself repeatedly warns the flock as does the flock's own religious leadership. The Pharisees are the “hypocrites”, the masked actors, *par excellence*, although only someone as perceptive as Jesus could see through them. They themselves could not. If Jesus had not exposed them first, surely you and I never could have, so much do they resemble us *at our best*. In the parable (exclusively Lucan) of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the former reflects a life of self-denial and sacrifice for others the likes of which few of us could even remotely approximate. For that, and for the fact that he had been graciously spared the sort of sordid existence of this Watergating extortioner, the Pharisee takes no credit himself but attributes it all to God, *sola gratia*: “I thank thee, God...” (18:11)

It could well be that the reason Jesus singled out the Pharisees, these really impressively shining examples of selfless service and Godward eucharist, is that no other group in the Jewish community resembled so nearly as they did Jesus' own program for the kingdom. So nearly but not quite. The proverb by which Jesus best characterized his program, “Whoever would gain his self will lose it and whoever would lose his self will gain it,” the Pharisees seemed to exemplify, if anyone did. They were the ones who, thanks to God, could somehow lose themselves for others almost unstintingly (almost) and only at the very last moment, with only a fingerhold on

their lives, parlay their self-losses into self-gains, thus justifying the whole sacrificial risk as having been worth it after all.

The Pharisees knew that that is the only authentic way to be somebody and not—like this grasping, I’m-going-to-get-mine tax collector—a nobody. No wonder, when a savior comes along who is for just anybody, for “all the people” (v. 10), the Pharisees decline. For they knew better, “Where everybody is somebody, nobody is anybody.” Who wants to be just anybody, least of all when you are already perfecting your own no-lose way of “losing” yourself (almost), of so acting like the world’s nobody (almost) that the world insists you must be somebody?

To believe that by losing yourself *almost*, you can keep yourself—that, at least to begin with, is the shepherds’ “night” which imperils their flock. And if on that first Christmas it was actually a physical, chronological night as well, then for Luke that coincidence would only have signaled all the more that darker night of the pharisaic fallacy which threatens every reader of the Story, especially perhaps the best and the brightest.

B. Advanced Diagnosis: The Frightful Visitor

What is worse even than that initial darkness of the pharisaic fallacy—calculate your losses for what they can net you—is that that benighting illusion is doomed sooner or later to be unmasked, shone through. Sooner, if the unmasking happens now, in this ahead-of-schedule “apocalypse” at the hands of Jesus. Later—but then too late—in the same Lord’s final apocalypse, The Last Analysis. Either way, his “visit”—his coming to see us in a way that we ourselves must see him seeing through us—is cause for terror, mortifying fear (*phobos*). Granted, even though everybody is almost always afraid of something or other—for instance, the religious leaders are afraid of “the people,” the disciples are afraid of dying or of the authorities—almost no one (only the demons and a handful of discerning God-fearers) ever have the good sense to fear the right One, the ultimate Visitor. Still, that everyone has *reason* to fear him (literally to be scared to death of him) considering what they have to hide, only underscores that everyone’s cover is due at any time to be blown. Not even the most deceptive night can save any of us from being found out.

C. Final Diagnosis: Lost

Being found out as what? Not only as losers but as lost. That is the worst of it: not only that by trying to cashier our self-losses into self-gains *we* lose *ourselves*—that would be bad enough—but worse by far, that Someone *else* loses us as well, namely, our original Possessor. He—or in the idiom of the housewife’s lost coin, she—has lost us as surely as a shepherd has lost a stray sheep or a parent has lost a runaway son. With a single ingenious word, “lose,” this Spirited evangelist has captured one of the profoundest theological dilemmas: how to describe us sinners as belonging primordially to that One who creates us yet in a way that he actually does not have us after all? That lostness from him is the diagnostic flip-side of the angel’s reference to the Baby as “Savior”. (v. 11) The presupposition of his coming to seek and to save us is that otherwise he does not really possess us, though he should. Instead of “peace” between him and us (v. 14) there is then only alienation mutually. Nor does it follow that being lost to him then means that instead we belong only to ourselves or belong only to such possessive superpowers as the Caesar Augustuses who by a single “decree” can keep tabs on their whole world (*oikoumene*, v.1). No, the realistic alternative to being possessed by the Baby-Savior is to be owned instead by that anti-god who reminded Jesus in the wilderness, “all this authority” of the *oikoumene*—including Caesar’s and the USA’s—“has been delivered to me.” (4:5, 6)

II Prognosis

A. Preliminary Prognosis: “Savior”

All that being the problem, what is the Christmas solution, that polar opposite to which now we try to negotiate a crossing? How does that same One who so devastatingly sees through us as faithless darklings, now, in the Baby, see us through? To say it all at once is to say what seems too good to be true, with the empty-handed result that all we do in that case is accept the prognosis merely as true and not as what it truly is, good—“good news of a great joy.” (v. 10)

So, for a start, what most conspicuously is the solution? Most conspicuously it is that odd feature which always distinguishes the Christian solution from all others and which, if we still have any capacity at all for wonder, must strike us either as simply amazing or as pathetic nonsense. I refer to the way, the apparently immoral way, in which New Testament christologies right in the middle of the Story literally change the subject. Having begun by diagnosing us, which is proper, they suddenly shift responsibility for our solution to this other human subject—in this text a mere infant at that—this what’s-his-name who has more than his hands full with his own troubles. On top of that these christologies rationalize that shunting of responsibility by naming this Baby with the most extravagant profusion of messianic and imperial titles, “Savior” and “Christ” and “Lord”. (v.11)

The fact that Luke-Acts may not operate with a vicarious model of atonement softens the scandal of this change of subject not one bit. If anything, Luke’s christology is even more ambitiously transcendent than the one-for-one substitutionary models. Witness the way the Lucan Jesus does for us what we ourselves could never do. He, the sole “savior”, saves us: we do not save ourselves. And from whom? Not just from ourselves. His antagonists are not just you and I, and not only those powerful “benefactors” like the Imperium or the Sanhedrin, but finally those demonic world owners whose claim to the world and us enjoys a measure of legitimacy which even God seems to respect. Hence we cannot, and are not even authorized to save ourselves.

The way Jesus “saves” is that he wins back the world—the whole Jerusalem-to-Rome-axis *oikoumene*—for God’s repossession, but all on the wild presupposition that it is to God *in this Jesus* that the world belongs in the first place. Jesus’ audacity is not merely that, in order to rescue the strays and the lost, he dares to breach God’s sabbath laws. That much anyone, also a Pharisee, would do for something which is his own—say, his own ox. That is only reasonable. Ah, but that is the radical rationale for Luke’s whole christological claim, namely, that those lost coins and sheep and prodigals whom Jesus loses everything to recover are after all *his own*, whom he at last is simply “finding” again. To regain what is his it is altogether rational—“necessary”, scripturally and ontologically—that he do what any determined owner in his circumstances must do. As the proverb says, he must risk everything—and without pharisaic fudging. But what he for his pains wins back is not only his own life, but his possession of all of us as well. Dubious winnings perhaps, though he did not seem to think so. Where else could we—everybody, “all the people”—ever count for so much? On that Lucan rationale, what at first seemed absurd begins to appear, at least to the world’s nobodies, quite reasonable after all—too good to be untrue.

B. Advanced Prognosis: “Joy”

If that much of the solution already sounds good, what follows gets even better. The shepherds, who have to be rescued by a saviour quite other than themselves, are nevertheless drawn in to his salvational action as responsible firsthand participants, as themselves self-losers and regainers

who thus “follow” their Lord’s own cruciform lead. They themselves begin at least to experience that same mortifying loss of self (*psyche*) in face of the dreadful apocalyptic “glory” which blows the cover of their “night”. The hilarious surprise, however, is that this Visit turns out to be not the final apocalypse, from whose terror there would be no recourse, but is rather a mercifully premature apocalypse which boldly scoops the final one, and actually averts and thwarts it.

True, the shepherds are not spared their initial terror. The God-fearers never are, for that—their dying—is already part of their salvation. But, this being the Pre-Visit and not the final one, the Visitor does sweetly intervene and, through his messenger, authorizes the God-fearing shepherds to do what just plain fearers (like the Pharisees) are never authorized to do, “Be not afraid.” (v. 10) Hearing that is like getting one’s life back *post mortem*—like “repenting”, as Luke says, “for the forgiveness of sins.” Not that there is no need anymore to fear God but rather that, with the coming of the Baby, even God-fear gets trumped—over-joyed.

C. Final Prognosis: “Glorifying”

But Luke saves the best till last. What is better even than the shepherds’ over-joyed fear which the Baby’s coming occasions in them personally is that they then take their experience on the road, so to speak, and go public with it. Actually, the Story does not make all that much of the shepherds’ own “experience” if by that we mean their faith. As believers go, they might have been about as superficial and sensation-prone as their hearers seemed to be, if all the latter did was “wondered at what the shepherds told them.” (v. 18) Only faithful Mary—the one member of the cast besides the Baby who continues as a major character throughout the two-volume sequel—reflects the tenacious “pondering” of that “good soil” which “holds the word of God fast in an honest and good heart.” (8:15) That is not said about the shepherds, but probably because their talk was not primarily about their own faith.

What they did talk about was “all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” (v. 20) In other words, they simply told it as they saw it—more exactly, as they had been coached to see it. But what was it, with the angel’s prompting, that they saw? Answer: not just the Baby but “the baby lying in a manger.” (v. 16) As Raymond Brown observed, that portentous “sign”, namely, that the Baby’s mother “laid him in a manger” (repeated three times within the Story) seems as important to the plot as that the Baby was born at all! That is all the more significant in view of how grudging Jesus is about signs, except for signs of repenting—that is, for losing our lives for his sake and only then regaining them. But what else is this sign but a loser’s sign? The way the Baby was swaddled and “lying” in a manger anticipates the way he would be wrapped and “laid” (same verb) in a sepulchre. (23:54) Both places were signs of his being dispossessed—a borrowed tomb, a make-do manger (“because there was no room for them in the inn”, v. 7)—just as everywhere he had “nowhere to lay his head” even though he was “the Son of man”. (9:58) But that was exactly what the shepherds’ sign was a sign of, and what they had been told to look for: how this homeless Baby was, by that very token, “Peace” for all the earth.

What the returning shepherds accomplished with their talk was “glorifying and praising God.” (v. 20) (Which suggests perhaps that, in seminaries, evangelism should be taught as part of liturgics.) Now this doxological reaction is, throughout Luke-Acts, a standard reaction of ordinary bystanders. For that very reason, however, because it is not limited to privileged apostolic somebodies, the shepherds’ very common doxology is all the more “glorifying” (*doxazentes*). Whether or not these strange heralds are intended by Luke as precursors of the later apostles, what is certain is that right within this Story they take over a role which earlier could be handled only by the “heavies” in the cast, the angels. Now it is these shepherdly nobodies (who are never heard from again) who replace the Lord’s own angels and go forth shining this

manged Lord's *doxa* right back out into the smothering demonic darkness, publicly unmasking the world's thickest plausibility structures, all the way to Jerusalem and Rome and the frontmost office of the *oikoumene*.

Robert W. Bertram