

Mega-Fear, Mega-Joy

Colleagues,

Bill Yancey, our pastor at Bethel Lutheran Church, St. Louis, asked me to supply the homily for Christmas Day in the morning. Two homilies on the evening before, he said, prompted him to send in a sub for this morning. Here's what I prepared. Give or take, this is what was proclaimed.

The assigned lectionary text is the "shepherd-part" of Luke's Christmas gospel—vv. 8-20 of chapter 2.

Christmas Peace and Joy—both Mega
Ed Schroeder

The Shepherds and the Angels

8And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

16So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Mega-fear, mega-joy. That's the theme for this morning. I'm not making this up, but taking it straight from Luke's text for this Christmas morning. You don't see that in the English text I just read. In Luke's own Greek language the shepherds "feared a mega-fear" and the angels proclaimed a "mega-joy." Mega is not just very big. Mega is off the charts. In both cases they refer to the "mega-agenda" in our lives—in all people's lives. The mega-agenda is the human heart, in Biblical imagery, the God-box: what is your heart hanging on in that God-box, and what do you get from your heart-hanging? Mega-fear or mega-joy?

But before we get into Luke's own mega-fear, mega-joy text, one more sortie into Luke's Greek vocabulary. His word "poimenes." The root verb behind this noun has a country tinge: roaming the fields on the lookout while taking care of something, or someone. Could be livestock. Could be people. Shepherds are caretakers. So aren't we all? Both caretakers of other folks, and folks ourselves who need—at least, want—other folks to take care of us too. To attend to us. If nothing else to give us some attention.

So back to the fields of Bethlehem. The Christmas story—out in the country—is talking about us.

Diagnosis: Shepherds need shepherding. Why? and How much?

- A. Often in the dark. In other places in the NT the word “poimenes” is used for pastors. And the Latin word “pastor” is the nickel-word for shepherd. Folks out in the pasture. It’s all connected. Luke may well be punning here in telling us of the shepherds “in the fields” on Christmas Eve. He may also be talking about pastors in Christian congregations at the time he was writing this—decades after the story he’s telling us. Caretakers, but caretakers benighted. In the dark. True for us caretakers too? You fill in the blanks. Both sides. In the dark in our own callings to be caretakers of others. And our own darkness about just what sort of caretaking we ourselves are most in need of. Even mega-darkness. But that analysis is now coming.
- B. Frightening things happen. Sometimes BIG. “Mega fear” is Luke’s word for it. And note what made this fear so “mega” for the shepherds in today’s text. It’s judgment day. Apocalypse Now. Or so they thought. Maybe they were right. Us too? Note the image for the apocalypse out there in the shepherds’ field. All the lights go on in the middle of the night. Everything gets illuminated. God’s illumination of everything around us. And inside us too. Not just the inside fear, but the inside stuff that is frightful—even to me! Who needs that much illumination—from whatever sources it comes? Also what gets exposed is our “mini-fears,” fears about very serious stuff, but stuff that darkens our minds from seeing the rightful Mega-fear that comes when we interface God. To fear the mini- and ignore the mega- is indeed frightful. It leads to Luke’s own third-level depth diagnosis.
- C. Luke’s choice term for depth diagnosis is LOST. That word isn’t in today’s text, but it’s a biggie for Luke

elsewhere when Jesus digs all the way down into the bad stuff. See Luke 15 (only in Luke, these three parables all end up LOST). The third one about God losing his own kids—both the one we call the prodigal (hell-raising) son and the “good-guy” son who played it straight, but still wound up hating both his father and brother. In a word: LOST, really lost! One guy lost in his UNrighteousness, the other lost in his righteousness. Both needing a Mega-rescuer. What losers need most is a winner. To cope with losses you need savings. Better said, a Savior. Which is the angelic word in the midst of the shepherds’ MEGA fear at the Apocalypse Now that came their way. Savior and salvation in Biblical language are not religious terms. Savior is a rescuer. Salvation is getting rescued. It’s today’s jargon—every day in the media—“rescue package.” Savior is a daily life term in Biblical days—and at the end of 2008. Needed when you’re LOST is a RESCUER.

A Mega-Caretaker for Caretakers who need Mega-Rescue

D. Comes now what makes this story Gospel, “glad tidings of great (the word is mega again) joy.” Why? A Rescuer. And the angels (remember, in Biblical language the main point is not wings and flying, but as we’ve learned to say, angels are God’s agents busy “messaging.” ANGELOS (Greek word) simply means messenger. Someone telling you something you don’t know, but need to know, and pointing the way to go. And these messengers point to the Rescuer—mega-rescuer from persistent-darkness, mega-fear, and when we’re lost, lost big-time. Not us, say the messengers, but over there—as wild and weird as that may seem—human baby, stable-manger, swaddling cloths. There’s the Mega-rescuer for the Mega-lost ones. Humans need a human rescuer, so THE rescuer has to start out human—aka a neonate, an infant—a baby. The add-on

about “lying in a manger” is already an extra clue. Not just for how strange this Rescuer is, but for what sort of rescuer we need. Same Greek words that Luke will use at the end of the story: “wrapped (now in linen) . . . and laid (in the tomb).” But that’s the rescuer we caretakers need. For we are caretakers who need a caretaker–mega-version. Big time need for a rescuer: benighted, fearful and fearsome, finally lost. Remember that means “Lost to God.” God’s Mega-Shepherd is out to rescue what God’s lost. So he starts with sending his own Best Boy, his Mega-Son, to find us.

We need a mega-caretaker for the whole nine yards of our lives—from the cradle to the grave. So the Mega-caretaker starts there too. But it’s only step one. To carry out the full job—given the mess of the benighted/fearful ones—he’s on his way beginning at Bethlehem to the wrapping and lying at the end of his life. We need a rescuer from the cradle to the grave—and so he is. There were two monosyllables in the angels’ message to urge us to connect with this Manged Messiah: “FOR YOU this day a rescuer. So come and see. Here’s what you will find.”

In Luke’s language that’s an invitation to faith. Come here, trust this rescuer. When you do, Lost is Found. Loser has a Saver. Strays get rescued. Losers become winners.

That’s what gets messaged to us this day again.

E. Which leads to Joy. Mega Joy trumps Mega Fear. In Biblical lingo joy and happiness are not synonyms. Joy comes with Good News about the mega-agenda of our lives. In Biblical perspective you can even be crying your eyes out and still have JOY. Things can be going to hell in a hand basket,

the you-know-what can be hitting the fan, it can be apocalypse now. Take a second and name the alligators right now in your life. BUT . . . but linked to the Rescuer, YOU are not LOST, not at all a loser—even should you lose everything! None of these monsters, none of these losses, can make YOU a LOSER. Christ the FINDER, is Christ the KEEPER.

Happiness it is not, but laughter does come with joy. The Rescuer, remember, had the last laugh over the last nemesis. Entombment was not the end of his line. Easter Sunday was. He has the last laugh on all the alligators—Judas, Herod, Pilot, death itself. So do we who hang our hearts on him. His trumping death was also FOR US. So we get the last laugh too.

- F. Taking over the angels' job in the spaces and places where folks are benighted, where mega-fears still tyrannize. Note that in today's text Luke predicates to the shepherds AFTER they've encountered the Rescuer—after faith in this one—the same verbs that the original messengers had: "Glorifying and praising God." Not just in generic terms, but "For all that they had seen and heard." Not primarily to make God happy, but to get the message out. To do messaging. To be messengers, to be angels—yes, wingless ones. That's the last piece of the Christmas story. US. All of us in the the individual "shepherd-fields" where we live. Here's where the Lost are still wandering around like stray sheep. Here's where darkness outshadows the day. Where all sorts of alternate rescuers are on the scene. But they are most often lost sheep too. Their mini-flashlights don't work to illuminate the mega-darkness, don't expose the whole nine yards of the human dilemma. Thus they never get to THE RESCUER who handles the whole nine yards, the Rescuer in the Bethlehem manger. The Lost

need to do some finding for themselves. As the angels said, "You will FIND the Mega-rescuer wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Remember that old ZIGGY cartoon? He's staring at one of those wall maps where an arrow points to say "You are here." But then there's a second arrow with this message: "You should be THERE!"

That's the Christmas assignment for us human caretakers. Do for folks what the wall map did for Ziggy. "You are Here. You should be There." Namely THERE is where the mega-rescue package is. The Mega bail-out. Here's what it is: mega-darkness enlightened. Mega-fear trumped by joy. The lost get found. Mega-losers become mega-winners. Luke's angels are messaging it to us this morning. After the benediction the angelic assignment passes over to us. The voice from the manger says: "OK, now that you've been shepherded at my manger (again), from now on the angels' job is yours. GO for it."