

Christmas Day

THE BIRTH THAT TURNS FEAR INTO JOY

Luke 2:8-20

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

2:8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 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." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Author's Note: Many insights below are gleaned from Robert Bertram's "A Christmas Crossing on Luke 2:1-20" which can be

found in the Crossings' web library at www.crossings.org/archive/bob/ChristmasCrossing.pdf. This is highly recommended reading.

DIAGNOSIS: Old Times, Old Ways

Step One: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *In the Dark*

Shepherds are out in their fields, living un-remarkable (as in, neither they nor anyone else had much to say about their) lives as undistinguished low-lives. Since it is a common Lukan technique to connect the time of day to the underlying reality of a situation, it is significant that these shepherds are watching their flocks at night; they are in the dark. We are reminded of Zechariah's prophecy just a chapter earlier: "You, child...will give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (1:79). The shepherds' lives reflect the darkness of a world that seeks darkness to cover its injustices, its sinning against each other. From birth to death, life is a struggle, characterized by familial, societal, and political strife. So, when the angel dramatically appears before the shepherds, lightening up their darkness, they instantly conclude that judgment day has come, meaning: God has arrived on the scene. (Evidently, they knew their Hebrew scriptures.)

Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Fear-full*

The poor shepherds' immediate reaction to this realization is that "they were terrified" (v. 9). Just as when the Prophet Isaiah, upon being transported into the court of God, is full of fear and cries out, "Woe is me! I am lost" (Isa. 6:5), so these shepherds instinctively know their cover is blown. They have nothing to show for themselves before God except their sins. They stand exposed. After all, the way the world operates is that all must give an accounting for their lives.

Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *No Peace with God: Lost*

Thus, for these poor shepherds, this messenger is an “angel of death” come to announce the sentence they know they rightly deserve. In fact, their daily strife has been a reflection of a deeper, more serious rift between them and God. With nothing to show for themselves, the final ruling is already clear: Death. Time is up.

PROGNOSIS: New Time, New Ways

Step Four: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *A Time Change: Peace with God*

But instead of the expected death sentence, this angel who lights up the dark turns out to be an “angel of mercy” and delivers a birth proclamation: “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (v. 11). Sounds like a reprieve! One can almost hear the angel laughing with delight as he explains that, yes, God has indeed come to earth, but not with an executioner’s ax. Instead, God has come as “Savior, the Messiah,” to save sinners. God intends to find the lost, to bridge the God- -human rift. In fact, time is going to start all over again with this royal birth, a New Age will begin—an age of “peace” between God and humankind (v. 14). We are given a hint as to how exactly God will manage this recalibration with the sign of a “baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger” (v. 12). Those bands of cloth portend the ones that later will wrap him in death, and from which he will be unbound in his resurrection. He will be Savior by assuming humanity’s sentence and surviving it. The joy of it, as the angel explains, is that this will all be “for you!” (i.e. those who live in darkness).

Step Five: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Fear Not*

Therefore, to those shepherds who first reacted with fear at

God's coming, the angel declares: "Fear not"—instead, be full of joy (v. 11). Fear itself gets recalibrated, but in this case, it is a two-step process. Step One begins with the appropriate terror-fear of sinners who have had their covers blown, who are mortified (killed) by the intensity of God's brilliant presence. Step Two, that terror-fear is recalibrated into a fearsome-joy as those addressed die to their mortal selves (repent) and accept what is given to them in return—the life and righteousness of Jesus, as their own. Now they do have "something to show for themselves," something strong enough to get them through the judgment. Fear is over-joyed.

Step Six: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *All Aglow*

How to respond? First a "multitude of the heavenly host" join the angel and break out in jubilant praise, singing "Glory to God in the highest heaven" (v. 14). Then the shepherds go see this marvel they've just heard about (vv. 16-17). Then, all aglow with the glory to which God has introduced them, they pick up the angels' tune and return to their daily lives and make "known what had been told them about this child" (v. 17). The glow of the Christ child in their lives lights up the darkness, announcing that peace on earth has been restored between God and sinners.