

# Christmas Eve – Epistle

## The Invasion of Grace

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve, 2001

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

1In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own town to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was a descendant from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then the angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign of for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"

15When 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. 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

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## **Diagnosis: The Presence of Judgment**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *In the Dark.*

We all know the Christmas carol, "Silent night, holy night" and the warm, sentimental feeling it brings on Christmas Eve. "All is calm; all is bright." But that song depicts what the night became, not how it started out. The night, the dark, is not a romantic abode for the shepherds, but a symbol of all that is dark and dangerous in the world. The dark is that from which we need protection, even if it be only a rickety stable. The dark is also a symbol of the uncertainty of life. When we "know not what the morrow brings" we speak of ourselves as being "in the dark," left to the hands of fate, vulnerable to the attack of our enemy. The "dark" is no better a place for us than it was for the shepherds, and it is still an adequate description of the situation in which present day Christmas worshipers find themselves.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *Terrified by the Glory of the Lord*

The surprise of the Christmas gospel is that the darkness and uncertainty that covers shepherds of every age is only a hint of

the dangers that surround them—and us. Take away the darkness and replace it with, say, the “glory of the Lord” (2:9) and what do you get? Answer: not calm but “terror” (2:9). Why is that? Why is it that, in spite of how much the shepherds may have feared the darkness and uncertainty of life, they feared even more “the glory of the Lord”? Answer: the darkness is not only a place of danger but also, paradoxically, a means of cover. The shepherds—and we—live not only in fear of the dark, but also under the cover of the dark, so that their sinfulness would not be revealed. What a sorry schizophrenic state we live in. The darkness is not only that which we hate, but that which we need. Though the thief may fear the dark, infested as it is with other thieves, he fears even more the brightness of the police searchlight. When the “glory of the Lord shines,” it blows our cover and reveals all—especially the sinfulness of the shepherds and of all people, including you and me. No wonder the “glory of the Lord”—as splendid and bright as it is, does not, upon first encounter, make for “calmed” souls, but “terrified” consciences.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *The Presence of Judgment*

The terror that “the glory of the Lord” struck in the consciences of the shepherds is not rooted in a misunderstanding or uncertainty about God, but in God’s judgment on sinners, a judgment that is as real and immediately present as the darkness. True, sinful shepherds are prone to obscure that truth, to keep it in the dark. But such an illusory attempt to secure hope and calm in this world is pure foolishness, what Ernest Becker, called “the denial of death,” pretending there is no such thing. Veiling truth of God’s judgment will certainly not prevail in the end. It hardly works now around—to wit, the present terror that confronts the human psyche day after day. The shepherds’ terror meant that, in the signs of that night, they experienced the foretold day of judgment, that day when the

“Son of Man” would come in glory and power at the end of time, with his holy army, the heavenly host, to make holy war on the world, to judge the nations, and to rid the world of unrighteousness (see Luke 21:20-34). Apocalypse now is the substance of the shepherds’ terror, God bringing the Day of Judgment upon them in the present moment. The very telling of the Christmas story would lose its logic—not to mention its eventual joy—if it were not framed in light of that truth.

## **Prognosis: Invasion of Grace**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *The Invasion of Grace: “Peace on earth among those whom God favors”*

That the shepherds became terrorized by the thought of God’s judgment at the sight of the angel is essential to the Christmas story. But that is not the main point of the story. As it turns out, this invasion of earth by the heavenly hosts of God beginning with a few shepherds on a Judean hillside is an invasion force of a different kind. It is a preemptive strike designed not primarily to evoke the terror of the final day of judgment—though it cannot help but do that—but, more importantly, to counter that Day. The invaders, in other words, come with grace. Their purpose is to proclaim the good news that God is determined to show favor towards terrorized sinners. In other words, this angel and these heavenly hosts came bringing the terms of peace between God and humanity before it is too late. And what terms they are! The sign is a baby lying in a manger, which is interpreted as the sign of a Savior. The sign points to an armistice, to a unilateral disarmament on the part of God, wherein God sends the Son of God in human flesh to bear in his body the brunt of God’s judgment on the world. The baby is the real invader. The angels are simply his cheering section. And the baby invades our space and time, that is, our darkness, in order to bear the cross, the judgment of God, for sinners.

### **Step 5: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution)** – *“Don’t be afraid” = Trusting God’s Terms for Peace*

Given the nature of the good news and the utter terror that the sight of the angelic spokesperson naturally evoked in the shepherds, it is no wonder that the angel’s first words are a quick “Don’t be afraid!” (v. 10). It is precisely the nature of God’s terms of peace not to deny the reason for our terror (the truth of our sin and God’s judgment), but to provide as quickly as possible an even greater reason why we might believe that God would preempt that awful truth in favor of a gracious truth: the granting of peace as an undeserved favor to sinners because of the sign of the baby and his vocation as Savior. Believing that is essential. For unless the terms of God’s peace reach as deeply into our being as the terms of God’s judgment, there is no peace. Terms of peace become real peace only as they are trusted. Terror is to judgment as faith is to favor, mercy, peace. Faith in God’s favor, then, is nothing less than fear pacified. Faith, therefore, is not incidental to the peace, but the vitality of peace—peace within. Faith is fear overcome; faith is God’s peace making its way into the world at the point of the believer. By its very nature, however, faith is not blind, nor is it autosuggestion. It is always a response to an external sign, not of our making, but of God’s making, that captures our imagination. Moreover, believing is always a matter of making use of God’s sign, whether that be a one-time sign, like the baby in the manger (v. 15) or the week to week sign of his body and blood in the bread and wine.

### **Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution)** – *Passing the Peace “on Earth”*

The nature of the good news of “peace . . . among those whom God favors” for Christ’s sake is not fully realized until it penetrates not just the believer but all the earth. That “passing of the peace,” that pacifying of the world, happens,

not by God sending more heavenly angels into the world. Once seems to have been enough for that. Rather, God has chosen to pacify the world through his most "favored shepherds," then and now. It is the shepherds, that is, all those whom God has favored with the peace of Christ, you and me, too, who now go forth as earthly "angels" (Greek for "messengers"), into the night and darkness of this world. Equipped with God's favor, strengthened through God's signs, we the favored ones go as the heavenly host of angels did, as Christ's cheer leaders, bringing the cheer of the good news of Jesus Christ, "the praise and glory of God" (v. 20), to whomever we encounter. Because of all that Christ has done, and because of all that we have beheld, we now can indeed sing, "Silent Night, Holy Night." For in Christ, the judgment of the night has been silenced, the darkness of our sin has been sanctified. Indeed, now we can sing "all is calm; all is bright."