

Christmas Eve – Epistle (another view)

The Night Visitor

Luke 2:1-20

The Nativity of our Lord

Analysis by Ron Starenko

Luke 2: 1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. 2 This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be enrolled with Mary his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. 7 And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8 And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; 11 for to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths 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, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!" 15 When the angels went away

from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; 18 and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

DIAGNOSIS: The Night

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

Ready or not, the Night Visitor cometh. Like when Jesus was born. "...there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (v. 8), working the night shift, boring maybe, troubling at times, feeling detached from the world now asleep, feeling vulnerable because bad things can happen at night, shepherds in the dark, having no idea of what is about to happen, really wanting no intrusions. Pretty much like all of us, avoiding encounters or confrontations, maintaining routines, doing our best to get through the hard times, yet never escaping our uneasiness, our dread.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *We Are Afraid...*

Children know what that is all about, perhaps better than we do. At night a child awakes, terrified, and cries out, "Mommy, there's someone in my room!" Rational explanations will not do. The fear resides deep in the human psyche, waiting to be awakened. Like when Jesus was born. "And an angel of the Lord appeared to them (the shepherds) and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were filled with fear" (v. 9). The

shepherds are blown away, not with surprise or awe or amazement; they are terror-stricken. Somehow they know that the Night Visitor is God, and who is prepared for that? Who wants to be “on the spot,” found out, seen through, judged and found wanting? Not me, not you. We all have our defenses, which we cling to, pitiful though they are. To meet God along the way, especially at night, and not have a leg to stand on is indeed a terrifying experience. No wonder sinners are afraid!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Because There’s No Place to Hide*

Where do we run when we are exposed? Not to the light. Like our first parents, we slink into the night. Perhaps we know that the night is our just desserts, to be condemned to the darkness. When the lights go out, whether that is the end of a relationship, the onset of devastating illness, another terrorist attack, or our own demise, we are stripped of everything and there is nothing to hide behind. When we contemplate the death of the universe and the lights go out – the sun, the moon, the stars – and we are in total, terrifying darkness, where can we hide? Wherever we flee we cannot escape God, the Night Visitor. So much for Christmas cheer.

PROGNOSIS: The Visitor

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Unexpectedly, the Visitor Joins Us in the Darkness...*

Unless, unless the Night Visitor joins us in our darkness, not to condemn, but to save, unless the God who uncovers our sin, leaving us powerless, is the same God who covers our sin in an act of unexpected, undeserved grace. By entering our darkness, by sharing the frightful night of our existence, God discloses a glory, at first a terror, to sinners that becomes “a comfort and a joy.” Like when Jesus was born. “And the angel said to them, ‘Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy

which will come to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord'" (v. 10). So, the stage is set. God will make good God's promise, send us the eternal Son, born of Mary, our Lord Jesus, who will dispel the darkness, heal the creation and bring light to the world, an eternal glowing. As Luke makes clear in his gospel, Jesus of divine necessity will meet the darkness in the suffering of the demoniacs, those helpless with ordinary sicknesses, the outcasts and the ostracized, the lonely and the lost, those in the grip of death. Jesus of divine necessity will enter there and suffer away our benighted existence, out in the open, by going finally to the cross, to visit us there with forgiveness, life, and salvation, and therefore save us from God, the Night Visitor.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – To Turn Our Fear Into Joy...

Were it only from our nightmares or even from our sins of the night that Jesus saves us, we would have a small Savior and the good news would be less than the best God could do, and our joy would be diminished. For sinners, the good news is so good that they are able to repent in the depths, from not having God at all to having all of God, from being dead to becoming alive again. It could not be so were it not for our Lord, in suffering and death and exaltation, who made possible a joy above all joys, so that we might truly fear, love, trust, and rejoice in God above all things. It is only the God-fearers who get to be God-rejoicers. "Glory to God in the highest!" (v. 14).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – And Send Us Into the World to Bring Light

The transformation continues. The Night Visitor turns us into night visitors, people, like the shepherds, who get to enter the darkness of the world, a world still caught in the wrong fears, bringing the light of the good news. "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had

heard and see" (v. 20). They reenter the world, their everyday, workaday world, with a new story to tell, a new lifestyle to pursue. And so do we. We are no longer in darkness, for the night has been turned into day. We are now free to follow our Lord and Brother into the world, to meet and minister to others, traveling as we all do, through pain, hunger, sorrow, guilt, fear, and death, sharing our joy, giving hope, bringing life, and helping others in turn to become night visitors themselves. Like when Jesus was born.