

Christmas Eve

CHRISTMAS LIGHTS, or SHADES OF GLORY

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve

Analysis by Jerome Burce

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And 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.

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.

Note: The Revised Common Lectionary invites us to regard the last six verses of this reading as optional, that is, to be read or not read on Christmas Eve according to the preacher's preference. But to quit reading at verse 14, with the celebration of the angels, is to dish up semi-gospel. Gospel, remember, is good news with equal emphasis on both sides of the term. When angels sing God's glory that's surely good but it's hardly news. They've been doing this since before time's dawn. But when shepherds start singing too (v.20)—now we're talking not just excellence but all-time major headline.

DIAGNOSIS: Halogen

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – On The Spot

AnyChurch USA, December 24, 2003—

The crush notwithstanding, observe David and Shelley Shepherd somehow abiding this evening in the usual pew (fifth from the back, pulpit side), draped as ever in squirming offspring. Are these Shepherds, like those others we hear about tonight, to be numbered among the least of the least? Hardly. This is America, after all, not Bangladesh. As you'd expect, the SUV that hauled them here looms in the parking lot. But as prophets like Ezekiel

long ago made plain (Ez. 34), what defines a shepherd is not socioeconomic circumstance but rather God-given responsibility for persons or creatures dear to God's heart. In tonight's remembering, that includes everyone from the fellows in the fields (v. 8) to nervous Joseph shepherding his grossly pregnant wife (vv. 5-6) to distant mighty Caesar whose decree turns "all the world" into a mass of sheep-like migrants (vv. 1, 3). In tonight's reality, that certainly includes David and Shelley (witness the squirmers), not to mention everyone else whose company they're keeping: teachers, coaches, mid-level managers, truck drivers, insurance agents, nurses, home-from-college sorority sisters. You name it. All have someone or something for whom Someone Else can call them to account. Call He will. At some level they all know it.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *In the Dark*

Hence the little lump in the pit of Shelley's stomach right now; though were you somehow to get her talking about it she'd spill with lesser, symptomatic anxieties, like whether or not the kids will enjoy their presents tomorrow morning, or whether David's mother will deign for a change to compliment her Christmas dinner. Truth is, Shelley is never quite sure that she's up to snuff as wife-and-mother Shepherd. Co-shepherd David is more blithe, at least now, the shaping of the family festivities being her department, not his. Maybe his mood changes next month when the credit cards come due. Though even then he likely repeats to himself a version of the same sermon he just laid on Shelley as they were driving to church. "Face it, Shel, for all that Martha Stewart or even my mom would tell you otherwise, there are no rules on how to throw a proper Christmas; fewer still on how to be a proper parent. You give it your best shot and that's that. Who's to complain? In any case, who's looking? Gotta love those privacy laws!" Notice how David is relying on darkness as cloak and comfort. "We're in the dark, so no one can

see us.” Again, “the rules are dark, so no one can judge us.” Thus have shepherds of every age and circumstance allayed their fears. Augustus doubtless did it. So did the Bethlehem flock-watchers. So do I.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Lights On, Lights Out*

Back to AnyChurch where the following won't happen this Christmas Eve but imagine it anyway. Begins the sermon. Suddenly a spotlight slices from the rafters directly to that fifth pew from the back, pulpit side. Alternatively God's angel, the preacher, starts calling the Shepherds by name, lifting David and Shelley up in their particularity as example and illustration of the points she wants to make. Will Shelley wish she were dead? You bet (see 5:8). Will David, as the livelier Greek text has it, “fear a mega-fear” (v. 9)? That too. Mega-fear is surely more than the NRSV's “terror.” Mix in rage, acute embarrassment, a ghastly sense of nakedness, a flash of piercing recognition that bluffs are being called and the truth is spilling out. As the other Christmas text reminds us, truth is an essential ingredient of God's Word and glory (John 1:14). God's truth about shepherds—every shepherd—is fierce and glaring (again, see Ez. 34). It shows every wart and dirty smudge, it melts veneers, it punctures pretensions. It makes plain that big “S” Shepherds (David and Shelley; Caesar and Quirinius) have more in common with little “s” shepherds than they (that is we) had presumed to think. All are the lowest of the low: not only not up to snuff (as Shelley suspected) but as far beneath it as earth is under “the highest heaven” (v. 14). Where do underachieving shepherds wind up? Still lower. See the rich man's tale (16:19-31) which is also Shelley's story, David's destiny, my fate and yours. Darkness and then some, unless—

PROGNOSIS: Incandescent

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Aglow in a Manger*
—unless there be—impossible grace!—an alternative to hell, some other place—still—lower for lowdown shepherds and Shepherds to wend their way to, yet a place of life, not extinction. “Good news, great joy!” says that first Christmas preacher, the same one, perhaps, who so recently reminded lowly Mary that with God “nothing will be impossible” (1:37). Now he confirms it. “Head,” says he (v. 11-12), “for Shepherdsville, a.k.a. David’s Town. There you’ll find a shepherds’ shepherd, David’s new David, the one equipped and destined to do what old David didn’t, which is to take and fulfill an impossible responsibility for you as well as for “all the people” (v. 10) who are dear to God’s heart (“whom he favors,” v. 14). How will you know him when you see him? By the signs—strips of cloth and a manger bed—that stamp him as One still lower than you, though on your account, not his. Why cloth strips? To signal the consequences to him of declaring you up to snuff and fit for Paradise (23:43, 53a.) Why a manger? To tip you off to how low he’ll finally go for the sake of saving you (23:53b).” So far the preacher. “Glory to God in the highest” the choir breaks in. But notice: what they sing of is a brand new glory, hitherto unseen on earth: glowing, not glaring; portending peace of the kind that only God can give.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Seeing the Light*

Which is precisely why our Shepherds, David and Shelley, that is, have nothing to fear from slicing spotlights or other preacher’s tricks this Christmas night. Bear in mind that in 2003 Shepherdsville is AnyChurch. That’s the place—still—lower where today’s shepherds are sent. There they too will find the Child, only swaddled now in the flesh and blood of a rag-tag shepherdly assembly, an aptly named pastor—Latin for shepherd—presiding (“who hears you hears me,” 10:16; see also and esp.

Mt. 18:20). Assuming this pastor knows his stuff he'll quickly point one and all to the mangers of speech and song, paten and chalice. Nestled in both forms is "the Messiah, the Lord" (v. 11). "Come," invites the preacher. "Hear him gurgle his delight at finding you here. See how his arms are reaching out to draw you in. Touch him. Enjoy him." One prays for Shelley that, setting aside her husband's silly pre-service sermon in favor of this one, she'll notice (to her surprise, perhaps) how utterly up to snuff she genuinely is for this moment, this place, this Person in particular and through him for God. Should she notice—should she trust her ears and eyes—then that knot of anxiety she was feeling is bound to vanish like a warmed snowflake. In the gentle light of Jesus she's good enough for God. Who cares, then, what Martha Stewart thinks, or even David's mom?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Twinkling Down the Road*

And perhaps Shelley says as much to David on their way home, for once preaching a little sermon of her own, inviting him to fret as little when the bills come do as she will tomorrow when dinner is served. This is something else that all shepherds finally have in common—those, that is, who have stood where these Shepherds were just standing. They return "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" (v. 20). Wouldn't you know, they become in the process the immensely responsible persons that God meant them to be all along. Responsibility is, at base, the ability to respond. The song of the Bethlehem shepherds answers the song of Bethlehem's angels. Shelley's little sermon echoes the one she got to hear. Both song and sermon glorify God, tempting others to do the same. They thereby fulfill responsibility's second aspect, which is to provide for the well being of God's dear ones who fall within our orbit. When all is said and done, well being is the unbreakable habit

of praising God with gusto, in harmony with the heavenly host (v. 13). From that praise comes light—and lightness—for a dark and heavy world. Shepherds of all sorts and conditions, moved and provoked by the Gospel of Christ, have been praising God incessantly from that first Christmas on. Luke will tell us about many of them as the present church year unfolds (for but one example see 24:52-53). You and I will see many more of them in action –our Davids, our Shelleys, Shepherds by name, shepherds more and more in truth. Joy to the world!