

"Oh, Holy Night?/!" -- Luke 2:1-20

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Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Emmett, Idaho
Pastor Michael L. McCoy

For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His Name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ,

What a night Christmas Eve is! The Festival of the Incarnation of our Lord has come once again and it is good to be here this evening in order to hear of God's *revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations (Romans 16:25-26).*

But imagine for a moment that, instead of coming here this evening, that you drove outside of town to a place where a couple of the local Basque shepherds are watching over their flock. Further imagine that you could not see any Christmas lights from where you stand, nor hear any sounds, including Christmas music. You get out of your car and walk into the field. You are not able to see any lights at all, let alone Christmas lights. You are not able to hear any Christmas sounds. You are sufficiently bundled up for it is a clear, cold night outside and you see your breath.

Now if one of those shepherds quietly strolled, so as not to disturb the sheep under his care, slowly sauntered over to you and asked you, "Good evening. As you look around these fields and hills, tell me what kind of a night is it?", what might be your response? We might answer with, "It's certainly a still and peaceful night. It's a beautiful night under these stars. It's a quiet night." Sooner or later, we would probably get around to saying, "It's a very cold night." If you asked the shepherd what kind of a night it was, he might answer, "It's a normal night; one much like last night and probably like what tomorrow night will be."

However, either one of you might have said, "Oh, it's a holy night!" And if you were the one who had answered, "Oh, it's a holy night.", it would probably be because you knew and remembered that it was December 24th. If the shepherd asked you what made it a holy night, you would be able to tell him the Story of the Birth of Jesus, the Holy Christ Child.

If the shepherd answered, "Oh, it's a holy night," wouldn't you like to ask him why and hear the Story once again?

Throughout Christendom there are many gatherings taking place this night as the people of God congregate to hear the Word and to receive Christ in the Sacrament. In many such churches, the Lord's undershepherds tell children of all ages, the Story - the historical account - of the Savior's Birth in Bethlehem on that night so long ago and so far away. In truth, it is the privilege of such local undershepherds, men who have been entrusted by the Lord, to guide and lead the people to Bethlehem to *see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.*

The Gospel Reading for Christmas Eve is the sermon text. Therefore, please listen once again to the Gospel Reading for Christmas Eve under the theme of ...

... *Oh Holy Night?/!*

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. 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, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. 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. And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not; for behold, I bring you Good News of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!" 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." And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this Child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

Oh Holy Night?

Oh Holy Night? Really? What was there so holy or unique about this night? Up to a certain point it was just a common night, no different from ten thousand before. Shepherds were tending their flocks by night and cattle were lowing in the darkness. As on all other nights of the year, old men moan with arthritis, mothers think about their grown-up sons and daughters, a husband and wife hold each other in a grieving embrace because an unborn child's heart is suddenly still, and this night is no different. As on all other nights of the year, an old woman can't get her breath, while little ones sleep the peaceful slumber of childhood, and this night is no different.

Young women give birth and lay their babies in cradles, cribs or even make-do mangers, singing lullabies to them. The Caesars of this night do not sleep the slumber of children. They look haggard with the effects of power and the corruption it brings. They have lied and they will do whatever it takes and initiate whatever steps necessary to remain in office. King Herod had done just that in the past and was capable of slaying baby boys in towns as far as Bethlehem should the necessity arise.

Since there was an enrollment caused by the decree of Caesar Augustus, at that time when Quirinius was governing Syria, there was the resultant heavy traffic on the highways and byways. Of course, few people traveled at night. All are hoping to find a place to stay the night. Certainly not all are going to find the shelter they hoped for and desire. When the local inns are filled, the unfortunate late travelers are left out in the cold and are pretty much on their own, thus resorting to sleep beneath a tree, under an overpass, or finding shelter in a stable.

In beds across this land, be it the shepherds' bundle on the hillside, or a pile of hay in a barn, or a waterbed in a motor inn, people think as they fall asleep. Some thoughts are about God and His expectations ... the demands that are written in hearts, on stone tablets, in Bibles and on parchment. This Law of God accuses shepherds, virgins, innkeepers, harlots, carpenters and kings ... butchers, bakers and candlestick makers ... you, me and the person sitting next to you. God's expectations are perfection and we have all not achieved it, *for all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God (Romans 3:23)*. And the Lord, the God Who does not grade on the curve, declares through His Word, *the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23)* and simply, *the soul that sins shall die (Ezekiel 18:20)*.

And dear people, indeed, death comes on this night just as on other nights as a shepherd dies defending his flock from a beast, as a cancer consumes one here and as a killer takes a life with drive-by shooting there and so on and on throughout this night. In a couple days, if we live that long, we will open the newspaper and read the obituary, discovering the always shocking news that people die on Christmas Eve.

We are like people sitting in a great darkness and we ask the shepherd, "Is it really a holy night?" The shepherd replies, "You are right. It just doesn't seem like a holy night to me either, and as the chill deepens in the first watch of this night, there is nothing out of the ordinary except, of course, that rather bright star shining over the little town of Bethlehem."

Oh Holy Night!

And in the double darkness of night the Word comes from the prophetic past. *I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not nigh: a Star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel (Numbers 24:17).* The oracle of the man whose eye is opened said long ago, *I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not nigh.* But dear shepherds and beloved sheep, the *now* is tonight and He is *nigh*. The prelude of Advent is over as this Star above Bethlehem makes its declaration: *Oh Holy Night!*

The calloused hands of the carpenter have helped his virgin bride to a place where beasts of the field stand and feed. There Mary, who had conceived by the Holy Spirit nine months earlier, now gives birth to the Son of God. So, dear Christian, you understand that it is a Holy Night! This confessed handmaid of the Lord ... this very young woman gives birth to the very Ancient of Days ... indeed, *to her first-born Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths.* So, dear Christian, you know that it is a Holy Night! The Christ Who was promised of old, Who would actively fulfill the Law in our stead, Who would take all our sins upon Himself, Who would die in our place, Who would rise from the dead, is *laid in a manger.* So, dear Christian, you know that it is the Holy Night!

But certain shepherds don't know of this Birth; they don't know it is the Holy Night at all. Except for that particular star, this is an ordinary, common night in the Judean hills around the city of David. But the loving Father of this little One, this Holy Child of Bethlehem, this Son begotten in eternity and born of a virgin, wants all to hear this Good News. Heaven itself is filled with joy and the Lord God Almighty dispatches a messenger to proclaim the Gospel on this Holy Night to the elect shepherds of the field.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not; for behold, I bring you Good News of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Now the shepherds knew it was a Holy Night!

Following the messenger's announcement of the great and mighty wonder, *suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased!"* Now heaven and nature may

sing *Gloria in Excelsis!* Now angels and archangels and all the company of heaven may laud and magnify His glorious Name, evermore praising Him and singing and confessing and teaching and believing that this Baby is the King of king, the Lord of lords, the Savior of the world, the Redeemer of the lost, and the Word Who has become *flesh and tabernacling among us (John 1:14)*. By the gracious working of the Holy Spirit through this Word, you and I may believe that this Jesus in an animal's feeding trough is *the Christ, the Son of God, and believing you may have Life in His Name (John 20:31)*.

What happened then? As a result of this Good News, what did the people do on this Holy Night? Well, let's see. A carpenter named Joseph beheld his Savior. Certain shepherds went over to Bethlehem to *see this thing that has happened, which the Lord made known to them*. An innkeeper will be busy with a full house. Herod will remain in power in Jerusalem. The choir of angels return to heaven and await further orders. *All who heard the shepherds' account wondered at what the shepherds told them*. Wisemen from the east behold the prophetic star and wonder about the newborn King, and *Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart*.

This Gospel of God comforts confessing shepherds, repentant harlots, faithful virgins, trusting innkeepers, ... all those who have received God's gifts of repentance and faith in Christ whether they be carpenters or kings ... butchers, bakers and candlestick makers ... you, me and the person sitting next to you. God's gift is the perfection of His Son and God's gift is the righteousness of His Son, for God's gift is His Son. While *the wages of sin is still death, the free Gift of God is eternal Life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23)*.

As a result of this Good News, what are the people doing on this Holy Night? Well, let's see. An old man with arthritis could moan in faith knowing *that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18)*. Little children may snuggle in their beds on this holy night with visions of sugar-plums, presents, sanctuary Christmas trees, and the Baby Jesus occupying their thoughts. Mothers may offer and present their petitionary prayers for their grown-up sons and daughters knowing that the Lord God always hears them and will send forth His Word. The old woman may use her last breath to say, *Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy Word (Luke 2:29)*. And that husband and wife who are grieving because an unborn child's heart no longer beats, may hold each other's hand in their tearful walk from the Christmas Eve service trusting in the One Who has said to His people, *I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow (Jeremiah 31:13)*.

And on this Holy Night, *the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them*. And on this Holy Night, the people of Our Redeemer returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Amen.