

SUDDENLY ANGELS

Christmas is not about the old. Christmas is about the new. Christmas means newness coming into our lives.

Can you imagine turning to the second chapter of Luke and having it read: “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. And after the census was taken, everybody went back to doing what they had been doing before. It was business as usual, after a brief interlude – a strange interruption. And things went on as they had always gone on before.”

The way some people celebrate Christmas – maybe even the way some of *us* have celebrated Christmas at times – you would think that was the way the story read. But Christmas is always the great harbinger of something new coming into life. I hope we can take that as the principal axiom of our prayers and meditations and expectations this Advent season.

That means that any of us who let Christmas get beneath our veneer – whether that veneer is busyness, doubt, a shielding against God’s influence, or simple inattention – will discover new things coming into our lives. Christmas means a new thing happening and us becoming new.

You are supposed to be setting that in your mind and brain as the major presupposition for this next entire month of your life. That means from now on you will be thinking about it, watching for it, seeking it out, hunting for it – this newness that will be coming into your life. If it leaves you the same, it is not Christmas! If it is the same old Scripture passage you heard a hundred times before, it is not Christmas! If you celebrate it all the same way, put up the same decorations, send cards to the exact same list, buy the same kind of presents for the same list of people, then it is not Christmas. It’s just play-acting, a dead and meaningless cultural twitch – a preprogrammed social habit that we have finally turned into a lifeless ritual.

Some people know or can sense already what the newness is for them. But you are not actually supposed to *know* yet. This is the Advent season: the time for seeking, for preparation, for getting ready. We don’t have to know what it is yet; we just have to know that we are supposed to be looking for it. And when we find it, it will make us and our lives different for the whole coming year.

Now let's add another word we often use for something new coming into our lives. The word is "SURPRISE!" Christmas is a surprise – the greatest surprise in all history. To expect a surprise is a contradiction in terms, but I cannot help that. If we don't expect surprises, we don't know the first thing about the essence of Christmas.

Now we have to correct for two small misimpressions. At least I always do. Growing up in the traditional American Christmas scenario, I assume I know where the surprises are going to come from and I assume they are supposed to be pleasant. It is one of my tasks, one of my jobs – it is my responsibility (yours too) – in Advent to find some way to undo this old programming, this old way of thinking. The surprise can come from any direction, from any person. It is even unlikely to come from the same place where I have found it before, unless of course I have assumed it cannot come from there anymore. That is the very quality of the anticipation that is appropriate. Don't wait until Christmas Eve to get on your tiptoes.

You should be smiling somewhere inside already, and on your toes by noon today. You should be saying to yourself already, "Where will it come from? Where will I notice it first? Will I discover a piece of it today, maybe in the very next conversation I have? This year I will try to make it easier for God; I will try to stay awake and alert. I don't know what the surprise is yet, but I know it's coming – straight from the Spirit."

Harder for me is the second correction. It does not have to be pleasant! Of course, we trust a loving God and "believe" it will be wonderful in the end, as the whole thing is unfolded. But while we are watching and alert for the newness coming into our lives, we must try to suspend all judgments and evaluations. (How do you know which end of the pony you will discover first? After all, some ponies try to nip or bite. But it doesn't mean they are not wonderful.) Again and again we almost miss Christmas because we start out to reject or try to reject a newness coming into our lives because we think we are not going to like it. I'm just reminding myself (more than you) to look for the newness, never mind whether I think it's going to turn out good or bad or neutral.

Now back to the story. What is the newness in a story so old? I read only a small part of it. Maybe you will have to ponder it into the afternoon or evening to find newness for yourself. My suggestion is that you forget everything except the shepherds for the moment. Just think of the shepherds and try to identify with the shepherds.

I cannot identify very well if I get hung up on all the details. I do not know enough about sheep. I have to forget that shepherds are not out in the fields at night in December. It is not that kind of story. This is not a videotape. This is not about what happened. This is about what it *means*.

So first I have to get simple (uncomplicated). What would it be like to spend years of my life with just sky and weather and sheep? The slowest-paced person among us would go stir-crazy, no doubt. We cannot imagine such eventless living. Something in us also longs for it: longs for a slower pace; a more basic life; a down-to-earth existence that notices the sparrow's fall, the spider spinning a web, the scent on the wind that signals a change in the weather. So we contemplate the shepherd life and think, "Peaceful, unhurried, quiet." And that's just right. That is what the story intends. We do not see the shepherds as hugely ambitious. They do not symbolize for us a ruthless search for riches, political power, or fame. They are simple, honest, humble folk. And they live peaceful, unhurried, quiet lives. We don't really know that, but we *feel* it. And that's right! Now, try to identify with the shepherds.

Who is first to learn of Christmas? Who is first to be told? Simple, honest, humble folk who live peaceful, unhurried, quiet lives. (Never mind power-hungry Herod or the wealthy wise men. That's Matthew's story. Don't get it mixed in here or you'll miss the whole point of Luke's story.)

So try to identify with the shepherds. Here they are, minding their own business, not trying to change the world or anything, just tending their sheep. And suddenly – ANGELS! Divine beings. Warrior messengers. Servants of the Most High. And these angels are incredibly happy! They are in wild celebration. Suddenly they just appear, as if all the realms beyond this tiny earth are rejoicing and the news is just too much to contain. Somebody got born, and the whole heavenly host has gone wild with joy.

Have you ever walked into a room where everybody is laughing or rejoicing and you don't know what it's all about yet? The mood is contagious. Often we are smiling and laughing with everybody else, even before we find out what the reason for it is. And here in this story is a dramatic moment. All of Heaven and all the spiritual domains are wild in celebration, and the earth doesn't have the faintest notion what it's

all about. That is the real theme of the story. The shepherds are simply witnesses of the rejoicing of the angels. Yes, they get told that an important person has been born – a Savior. What can that mean to them? They take the angels' word for it and, caught up in the incredible mood, they know it must be very important, very exciting, very wonderful.

So they go see the baby. Babies are wonderful. This one is in a manger, as predicted. So the angels were not lying. Who suspected that they were? What would the shepherds have thought of seeing a baby if the angels had not been so excited about it? Babies are wonderful. But *this* wonderful? This one must be, or why would the whole of Heaven be rejoicing?

That's all. What difference does it make to the shepherds? It's going to be thirty years before anybody hears any more about this baby. Most are not going to like what they hear, even then. So the shepherds will be old men, some of them dead. None of them will be disciples.

Only, maybe that does not matter to them. Maybe it is not just a matter of instant gratification or self-centered benefit. Maybe they trust God and rejoice for the generations to come – maybe for their own children or their children's children. We do not know. That is not the point. We never hear from the shepherds again. The only purpose of the shepherds in the story is that they behold – they are witnesses to the rejoicing of the angels – and they also found the baby as the angels had said.

Heaven knew something the earth had yet to discover. And simple, humble folk would be the first in the world to be told, to be able to understand, to be willing to accept and believe it.

Do you identify with the shepherds? Are you one of the simple, humble folk? Do you live a peaceful, unhurried life? Have you had one of those amazing times when you discovered, at least for a moment, that the spiritual dimensions around and beyond us are real, and that they are aware of far more than we are?

The shepherds remind us that we do not have to see it all fulfilled to live with a new hope. Hope transforms us, regardless of the layer or level of its fulfillment in our world at the moment. If the Savior is born, then life is worth living! If we know that, it doesn't matter how long it takes or when it will happen or how. Oh yes, I know – it is a matter of interest. We care. But if the Savior is born, then life is worth living.

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So the shepherds are witnesses of the great rejoicing of the angels. And the angels are heralds of a new hope. That's what Luke is telling us in this one tiny portion of the story. There is more to come – lots more! But that's for later.

The question already is: Can we keep up with this much? To be part of it, we have to be awake to it in ourselves, in our own lives. What new hope illumines your life this season? Have you seen the glory of the Lord shining around you? Have you heard the heavenly host singing?

If so, it means you are a simple, humble person, and you discovered it while leading a quiet, unhurried life trying to mind your own business. It came as a gift and as a surprise.

It also means you are a person of peace – by the story's very definition. You are one of the few on earth who have found God's peace.

For your Advent meditations, I have suggested two questions: What new hope illumines your life this season? Can you identify with the shepherds?