

Luke 2:8-20 (New Revised Standard)

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth 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 heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 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." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

She said, "Have you heard the news?"

"Well," me being me, a variety of options presented themselves. Perhaps William and Kate have tossed over Westminster Abbey and want to be married here, a more intimate setting? Perhaps not. I went with the safer option, "yes, I heard the news at lunch today. Costco is no longer going to be serving hamburgers at the food counter."

Now I can't remember what the correct answer was but "the look" told me I was not the grand prize winner.

Amazing, isn't it, what news some people fail to recognize as important news!

The shepherds out there in the field, just south of Bethlehem, taking care of business when suddenly ... an angel. Now the shepherds lived at a time when the world was spirited, the possibility of gods and messengers of gods was not a philosophical obstacle. It was, in many this respect, a time resembling our own.

A couple of weeks ago, we talked of how the stories of Harry Potter and Star Wars were part of the movement of our society away a narrow Newtonian world view. But our time is actually much more varied even than Harry. Check the Entertainment section, which contains the latest reports on what the popular mindset might allow, and we see that, for quite awhile now, we have been living in a world with many dimensions: the Twilight series is but the most popular of the vampire trend – the Blade series, The Vampire Diaries, Buffy (the Vampire Slayer) – which one of my younger clergy friends never missed because she thought it was the best metaphor going for work in the church, Angel, HellBoy, The Mummy series, the Ghost Whisperer and others, not to mention video games. We now live, again, in a spirited world.

If I were to tell you that some of our people, with the gift of mystical sight, saw a seraphim – one of those who sentinel the holiness of God - come above the pulpit in Gardner Hall and guard the entrance before we made the move into this sanctuary, you might look at me a little funny but, in our time, we at least have spiritual and intellectual room to allow for the possibility. Maybe?

And if I was to tell you that since we have moved into this sanctuary a number of people have reported that, at times, they could feel the presence of God so close that they were both awestruck and terrified? One said to me, “I could feel the presence of God fill this space from ceiling to rafters, which seemed open to the heavens and the Presence was so close behind me that I was terrified to turn around.”

Sounds a little too Biblical to fit the Oak Bay stereotype; and yet ...

I must confess that there is a part of me, like the shepherds, who prefer a “circle of safety,” while, at the same time, saying “God and your angels, fill this space and we your people so that we have a sense of the greatness of your presence and your purpose to which we are called.” Let it be our reality, as Gaye says in those godly play stories, that God comes so close to the people and the people come so close to God that we know....”

I wonder if my spiritual, emotional and mental circuits could handle that. The shepherds seemed to do amazingly well, even when a “multitude” of God’s elite warriors, the Heavenly Host, fell in behind the angel and the skies reverberate with “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace!” Imagine every military movie you’ve seen where the troops are marshalled, where the Dolby 5.1 surround sound is cranked and the windows are vibrating and the screen is full with, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace!” “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace!” And a picture begins to form.

OK, something big is going on; something powerful is about to be unleashed. Refocus.

And the shepherds said “maybe we should go and see.”

Maybe we should check this out. Those who watch the spiritual landscape of Northern society (N.T. Wright, [Simply Christian](#)) say that among the various forces now at work, three at least are compelling people to search for a deeper spiritual experience and, with that, yearning for a place to go and see.

One is a deep yearning for justice, that the world be not only saved from environmental disaster but there is something rising up within us that now looks at the pictures of people desperately poor, denied education, children forced to be soldiers, victims of natural disaster or political corruption and from deep within comes a cry that this quite simply is wrong. Whatever the chattering class say or the political analysis or the royal commissions this is just wrong and we need to change this. And so now, in many places, we are seeing strange alliances develop

between those younger and older, combining the wisdom and experience of one with the creativity and technological savvy of the other as they seek to be forces of meaningful change in the world.

This week I sent Carol an [article](#) about those who turn 60. Most, apparently, go through a three stage process beginning with “how can this be that I am 60?” and ending with heavy introspection. Boomers look ahead (because anyone who lives to be 60 has a good chance of living until they are 80) and ask:

“When am I going to do something that matters? When am I going to live my best life? When am I going to make a difference?”

It is that conversation, (according to Daniel H. Pink, [Drive](#)) occurring at an unprecedented rate in human civilization that sets up a “thunderstorm of purpose the likes of which the world has ever seen.”

And the backdrop is that Generation Y is already asking those questions and the first stirring of change is occurring in two places. First, the rise of socially responsible companies, and second, the rise of volunteerism.

Unlikely partnerships are developing between those over 60 and under 35. People, like the shepherds, are beginning to wonder where they might go and see where this deep yearning might be finding life.

Others who watch spiritual trends point to a growing need for and fascination with [beauty](#). Not to be crass, but it is one of the things we have here and need to enhance with partnerships with local arts groups. In an increasingly complex, chaotic and confusing world spirits are in need of places of rest and beauty where eyes and hearts may be lifted and, if angels are not seen, at least wonder is provoked, the soul reconnected and the eyes of the spirit recast.

The third powerful force driving people to seek a “new thing” is the hunger for real and authentic community. We are wired and wireless, connected, flooded with information and images and that is wonderful, at least to me, but there is also part of us that, more than ever seeks relationships marked by authenticity and integrity. People no longer seek a church because it is the right or proper thing to do but only because they sense it/we may be a platform for deeper relationships with God, one another, oneself and the world.

So the cries of the shepherds echo, “Let us go now to Bethlehem/some place where we have heard that this thing has taken place.” And that is what they, what we, seek. We/they do not so much seek a place where we can hear people talking about being church or church jargon but where a new kind of life is born and *where people are living* that glimpse of new life that was announced in the heavens and unleashed in the back of a Bethlehem cave.

As the managers of the manger, the platform tenders, that is our gift and our call – to keep the space, live the light in ways that reveal “this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” Things would be so much easier if we could just be a place for nice people to hang out but to be charged with the manger, wow! To be a safe place for God’s spirit to be and to grow, to be a place of nurture that can welcome all who are curious from stinky shepherds to scientists, academics, soldiers, bureaucrats ... Amazing.

Sometimes when I look at who we are and then think about the immensity of the need, the curiosity, the potential, the yearning that exists “out there”/in here it feels overwhelming. It is kind of like we are a nice little business, chugging away, figuring out some stuff, making what we do, doing what we do and then there is a knock on the door and the receptionist comes in and says, “Wal Mart would like to place an order.”

As the biblical story proceeds the shepherds were not alone. Others echoed their curiosity, “Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”

“So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.” When they saw, they told others and all who heard it were amazed. Mary treasured the words. The shepherds “returned, glorying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.”

The word spread and people became curious, sought the amazing news and were amazed. And, according to our history, lives were transformed, societies were reformed, ethics, morality and civility were recast. That’s what we want.

If you ever visit the [Church of the Nativity](#) in Bethlehem, you have to bend down to enter this little door then you walk, on the right side of the church, towards the front and then down narrow, winding stairs to the grotto beneath where legend has it that Jesus was born. And it is cave like, now with a star marking the supposed birth place, and surrounded by all kinds of relics and symbols of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Interesting. And I’d like to go again, maybe we can organize a trip but I’m not sure my heart was moved like that of the shepherds. The monuments there and throughout the Holy Land were good and important but I did not leave the archaeological sites glorifying and praising God although, to be fair, some pilgrims from other lands, did. But, as one from this culture, I guess I was looking for other good news.

So as one who has been to Bethlehem – and has the nativity set to prove it - I began to reflect on my trip to Bethlehem and some of the things that actually did move me. And I was somewhat surprised because, for a guy with a hamburger view of life, there *were* some things that made me wonder. Not that I could be – or should be – part of all of them (“circle of safety”) but there were some things right.

- Gatherings of Christians who intentionally committed themselves to periods of study, learning and practice of various spiritual disciplines.

- Groups of Christians – and others – who visited Palestinian refugee camps to bring practical hope for children, youth, and women.
- Groups of Christians who would put themselves in the way of abuse and potential harm as they walked with Palestinian children to school and face the threats and jeers of some Israeli settlers.
- Groups of Christians who would not bow to the dominant and powerful stories of either the Israeli state or the Palestinians but sought another road to peace, to ensure dignity and respect in the midst of an occupied country.
- Groups of Christians, from earliest times, who had devoted themselves to be healers and providing places of healing - hostels and hospitals.
- Groups of Christians who worked to maintain countless sites of beauty and devotion for pilgrims and others seeking something, where those of us who seek can come in, sit in the coolness, have conversation, rest on the journey and perhaps leave wondering.

And as I sat to this discipline I realized again that Bethlehem, in its truest sense, is not just over there but here. For much, maybe most of this, we do or could do, we are or could be. Glimpses of life recalibrated, renewed.

“Have you heard the news?” Of the news of the angels, I’ve heard a little and I am catching a glimpse. Who knows what else might be coming? I’m curious to see. Perhaps the heavens will shake and the rafters open to reveal the power of the One who comes and is present among us – it has happened before, maybe even today?

Attend to the manger. Prepare to be amazed.

May it be so. Amen.