

**Sermon: 2019/12/24 (Christmas Eve) - Micah 5:2-4a; Galatians 4:1-7; and, Luke 2:1-11\_BTR**

Imagine that *you* were a shepherd.

That is to say, for the next few moments,

Imagine that you were one of *those* shepherds - mentioned in our gospel reading, sitting in the Judean hills, two *thousand* years ago, overlooking the insignificant village of "Bethlehem."

Now, in all honesty, it is true that we don't know *exactly* what time of year Christ was born, and *some* Christians in the so-called "*Eastern*" traditions - *millions* of them, in fact, celebrate in January;

but though no one thought to write the date down when it happened, what *Luke*, an aspiring historian, seems *careful* to record is that, as we see, the miracle of the Incarnation - the miracle of God *the creator* coming into the world as one of His (human) *creatures* - took place 'by night': [Lk. 2:8].

And as *anyone* who has ever done *any* camping can tell you, the outdoors after sunset - in *every* season - can be uncomfortably cold, and this is especially true even for the eastern Mediterranean countries:

which *we* imagine, of course, are mostly *hot* desert,

but cloudless blue skies fail to trap heat during the day;

and, moreover, don't forget, you're tending your flock "at altitude":

almost 3,000 feet above sea-level, in fact.

(That's considerably higher than any of the "mountains" here in Warren County.)

So, there you are;

with little company except many goats and a handful of rugged colleagues.

You're probably sitting on the ground, on a fleece(!), of course.

Your eyelids are heavy.

You can't keep from yawning:

It's boring work; monotonous.

But you *must* remain vigilant:

there are *many* predators in this region:

Remember how, in the Old Testament, David, who came from this *very* place,

trained to kill the "giant" Goliath by fighting 'both lions and bears': [1 Sam. 17:36a].

And to that *fearsome* list you could add foxes, wolves, wild-dogs, vultures and, yes, even brigands.

This was, then, a truly *wild* part of the world;  
uncivilised, violent.

And poor.

Indeed, there's not much reason for you to feel patriotic:  
your nation's "glory days" - her heroes - are in the very distant past, and even then, they seem only impressive through parochial, uninformed eyes:  
No, *you*, (back) then, live in an age of *massive*, continent-sized contending empires - the Romans and the Parthians.  
And Israel, in comparison, is (like) a (*tiny*) flea on the back of those terrifying, warring "dragons."  
And your own ruler, Herod, paid a *hefty* bribe to retain any autonomy at all.

Yet, you are supposedly a "*chosen*" people!  
A "light to the nations," [Is. 60:3] which the ancient prophets claimed would be this... bright beacon of hope and excellence.  
Their grandiose visions, therefore, seem contemptible to you now.  
Laughable.  
Any (1st century) Jew with any sense and money, with connections and a passport - lives somewhere else: in foreign "parts" - in the bustling, colourful, classical metropolises of Egypt, Italy or Iran.  
And perhaps you yourself have an entrepreneurial cousin, once or twice-removed, who has made such a decision: to abandon this pathetic, dusty "backwater" that Moses once called, "The Promised Land."  
*Just as* Ezekiel saw God Himself "abandon" it five, *long* centuries ago.

He - Ezekiel - was one of the last seers - one of the last "mouthpieces" of Heaven; he had stood, actually, in the Temple in Jerusalem, the capital, when round about it the armies of Babylon gathered to destroy and loot it, and, I quote:  
"Then I looked, and above the dome [that was the Temple's ceiling, there, suspended, hovering in mid-air, hung] something like a [brilliant blue] sapphire, in form resembling a *throne*' - *the* throne; *God's* throne - and 'as I looked....[it] the glory of the Lord[,] rose up [and *up!*]' - like a great 'cloud' which shone from within with an eerie, blinding 'brightness', and he saw that the great chair had wheels, wheels covered with many eyes, too many to count; and at each wheel - at each corner - stood a cherubim, angelic warriors, who grasped its base, and spread their wings, and all of it 'rose...[and] went out [over] the threshold of the house', and, to witnesses' horror, disappeared into the far distance: [Ezk. 10:1-11:23].  
The King had left the building.

A *couple* more messengers came later to reassure the Jewish nation that that event - "the *Ichabod*" - wasn't the end; to remind them of Isaiah's prediction that a Savior would return - a "*Messiah*" - to re-shape the universe and vindicate the various Divine promises that had been made to Abraham and his descendants; but *all* this must have seemed like "*fairytale*s" - like *fabrications* - to the shepherds on that first Christmas Eve.  
Heaven had fallen *silent*, and that silence - that *terrifying* silence - likely was

interpreted by a great many in that generation as proof for atheism.

And maybe by you in particular.

After all, as a shepherd, you rarely had opportunity to attend synagogue, or to make the traditional sacrifices that were expected, though they must have felt rather empty and rote.

They didn't *appear* to make any difference.

*Your* commitment was out in the fields - with the (dumb) animals, and that made you something of an outcast; a loner.

*Then*, suddenly, the whole escarpment where you are was lit up like it's midday.

And glowing figures, standing in the sky as if on hard ground, begin speaking:

"*Fear not!*" They say. "*For see, I am bringing you good news.*"

"Good news" that, perhaps in spite of appearances, *no* one is overlooked;

that *no* one is unloved;

that *no* one is valueless.

That *all* are offered an *extraordinary* and *unwarranted* gift beyond our *wildest* dreams: of a "fresh start" and *eternal* life beyond death.

*Amazing* things, which were embodied by a single, mewling baby-boy;

a single baby-boy that you would find - *not* in a palace or in a "Whitehouse" - but in something *extremely* familiar to a shepherd: that is to say, in a 'manger.'

And the same invitation from those mysterious messengers is still being made right now to us if you listen.

What, then, is *your* answer?

I pray it is:

"Yes, Lord, show me your Son: I need Him, be born *in me* today."