

Sermon for Sunday, December 26, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"SOME THOUGHTS ON A USED CHRISTMAS TREE"

Text: "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God, for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them" Luke 2:20

This morning I want to talk with you about the shepherds of the Christmas story. I suppose I want to do this for two reasons. First of all, they were pretty ordinary people. They had had no visitation in the temple as John's father had. They had not been overshadowed by the Holy Spirit as Mary had. They had not been visited by an angel in a personal revelation from God that involved them as individuals as Joseph had. No, by all standards they were ordinary people and I suppose that appeals to me because I feel ordinary and I suspect most of us feel pretty ordinary, too. The second reason I have a particular affinity for these men is because they share an experience that is common to us, particularly the morning after Christmas. And that experience is that great experiences end. Most of us have had great moments, tender moments, meaningful moments that we wish could have lasted forever, but they never do. And somehow we have to cope with these let-downs, these spiritual vacuums that inevitably come after some great experience. Just for example, this morning as I left for church I looked at our Christmas tree. Yesterday morning there was an air of secrecy and expectancy about it. But not this morning. It looked rather bedraggled and woebegone, a little tired and dry, and my only thought about it was, "well, now comes the job of taking it all down." Yes, it had given up its packaged promises and in the very fulfilling of its mission, a sort of death had come to its tinsel glory.

Somehow Christmas does this to me. But the Bible tells us that the shepherds came away from Christmas glorifying and praising God and since they were ordinary people, too, I thought it might be meaningful to us this "morning after" to discover what had happened to these men. And as I thought about these men there seemed to me to be four things that stand out about them that will be meaningful to us as we think about our own religious experiences.

The first thing we notice is their sense of wonder. The Bible says of them that the angel of the Lord appeared and announced to them "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 Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." And the Bible says that with the appearing of the angel, "and they were filled with fear." Perhaps a better translation would be, they were filled with awe, with reverence, with wonder. A sense of awe and wonderment is always associated with the appearing of God. When the angel appeared to Zechariah in the temple, the Bible says, "And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him." When the angel appeared to Mary, the Bible says, "But she was greatly troubled..." Or go back into the Old Testament to the time of God's appearing to Moses in the burning bush. There we read, "And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God." (Ex. 3:6)

Yes, a sense of awe and wonder before God. As Joshua said to the Children of Israel, "Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth." (Joshua 24:14) Or as Ecclesiastes puts it, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." (Ecc. 12:13) Or, again, as St. Peter wrote, "Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God." (I Peter 2:17) Part of the problem of our world today is that we have lost our sense of awe and reverence and wonder. All things have become common. If ever there was a time when we ought to fear God it is today. In June of 1945 on a desert near

Alamagorda, New Mexico a brilliant flash of light ushered in a new age--the atomic age. It was a light such as must have come with creation or as the last man shall see at doomsday. And in that flash of light God had permitted mankind to unleash a power of such magnitude that it staggers our minds. And how we use that power determines our destiny. Only an awe before God will compel us to use such power wisely.

The second thing we might notice about the shepherds is not only were they filled with wonder, they went--they went. The Bible says, "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 then the Bible adds, "they went....they went..." (Luke 2:15,16) To put it another way, in the light of what had been revealed to them; in the light of the new knowledge they had, they acted. They did not stand around debating the matter, discussing the theological implications of it, investigating the psychological import of their experience. They could have done those things. And in doing so they would have destroyed the reality of what happened to them. But they didn't do that. They could have said, "nobody will believe what happened to us." They could have said, "People will think we are fanatics; people will think we are queer; people will think we are different so let's keep this to ourselves." But they didn't do that. Instead, on the basis of their experience of God they acted. They acted decisively. They acted confidently. They went to Bethlehem with haste.

I venture to say that there are not many of us here this morning who have not had some religious experience, some moment when we were intensely aware of God, some heightened time when every sense was acutely aware of a presence. But the real issue before us is not so much have we had such moments, but what have we done about them. The fact is, there is no emotion we can have that its origin and motive cannot be called in question. But whatever happened to those shepherds on the hillside that night they acted in faith, they responded in faith, on what they understood to be God breaking in on their lives. And as they acted, the Bible says, "and (they) found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger." If God is real at all, we shall discover his reality only when we act decisively in faith as he makes himself known to us. When Mary took Jesus to the temple to be circumcised, Old Simeon took the infant in his arms and blessed God. Then he said to Mary, "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also". Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish philosopher, comments that the sword that will pierce Mary's soul will be doubt--doubt that what happened really happened. Doubt that the angel really appeared. Doubt that this child was really set for the rise and fall of many. Doubt that she had indeed been visited by God. Yes, I suppose there will always be doubts in the hearts of all of us--especially when we are standing at the foot of some awful cross as Mary stood one day. Yet, God will never so overwhelm us that we are compelled to believe and the man of faith is one who acts, not because he has no doubts but because he trusts God.

So the shepherds wondered, and then they went. Notice thirdly that then they witnessed. The Bible says, "And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child..." You know, you don't have to grab someone's lapel, glare into their eyes, and snarl, "brother, are you saved?" in order to witness. No, but you do have to communicate the Love of God; you do have to--in some way--communicate Jesus Christ to others that they, too, might experience your awe and wonder. Do you know anybody at all who has troubles and sorrows and who needs God's love in their lives? Have you told them God loves them? Do you know anyone at all who is not committed to Jesus Christ? Have you told them about him? Is there anyone at all who needs lifting up out of ignorance and poverty and injustice? Have you lifted them up for Jesus' sake?

Several years ago I preached a sermon entitled, "New Men in a New World." In that sermon I said that a man who had given his life to Jesus had a new concern about his fellow man. I said that he had to ask himself questions he had never asked himself before--questions about poverty, racial injustice, ignorance, and so on. Afterwards someone came up to me and said, "I just want you to know I didn't appreciate your New Frontier sermon." I was simply stunned. I had not even thought about politics-- I had thought about the words of Jesus, "For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me... Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matthew 25:35,36,40) Perhaps--just perhaps--we would not have such government programs (we would not need them) if we Christians had not abdicated our witness, if we had not failed to witness to our brother what it means to belong to Jesus--not just by our words, but by our every deed.

The Bible says the shepherds made known the saying which had been told them concerning Jesus. And then it adds, "and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them." Will there be men in our day who are wondering--filled with awe and reverence? Only if you and I--by word, by deed, by the lives we live--are witnessing to them.

So the shepherds wondered, they went, and they witnessed. Then notice fourthly that they worshipped. The Bible says, "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." I don't know if the shepherds had ever had such a mountain top experience before or if they ever had another afterwards for the Bible doesn't tell us. And I suspect the Bible doesn't tell us because whether they ever had another wasn't really important. One was enough. One was enough because they kept that experience bright and beautiful through glorifying and praising God. The man who moves into a relationship of worship with God needs few experiences, but for the man who doesn't really glorify and praise God in his heart, a thousand such experiences won't be enough, he will still cry out for more.

I remember reading a story about a man who had what he called "My Blessed Experience." It was such a dramatic and moving experience that he didn't want to forget it so he wrote it down and put it away in a trunk in the attic. Some years later a friend was visiting and the man remembered about his blessed experience. "Wife," he said, "I want to share my blessed experience with my friend. Go up in the attic and get it out of the trunk." Presently his wife returned, her face crestfallen and apprehensive. "Dear," she said, "I don't know how to tell you, but the mice have eaten your blessed experience." The mice of time and circumstance and forgetfulness will eat up our moments of awe and wonder unless they are renewed at the altar of glory and praise of God. We will always be looking for newer and grander and more emotional experiences than the last. We will become sensation seekers, wanting more and more blessed experiences. But the man who meets God will act on that meeting and he will tell of that meeting and that meeting will be kept alive in his heart as he glorifies and praises God.

This morning my Christmas tree had lost its air of secrecy and expectancy. It has given up its packaged promises and in doing so a sort of death has come to its tinsel glory. But the meaning of Christmas will stay with me through the year if I have a sense of awe wonder before God, if I act in faith, if I witness in love, and if I faithfully worship in joy to keep alive in my heart the living Christ.