

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on December 24 & 25, 2024

Isaiah 9:2-7 / Psalm 96 / Titus 2:11-14 / Luke 2:1-20

I may have mentioned once or twice that I have been Chaplain on 3 Christmas cruises. I've also done 1 Easter cruise. On cruise ships the Chaplain is classified as a Guest Entertainer. It was quite the blow to my vocation to the priesthood, but what can ya do!

In addition to being a Guest Entertainer, the Chaplain on a cruise ship is categorized as "*supernumerary*". I had to look up the word "*supernumerary*" since I had never heard it before. It means "*exceeding what is necessary, required or desired*". Basically it means that I was surplus to requirements. Yet another blow to my vocation and to my personhood!

In the Christmas story we just heard [*and in the pageant we just saw*], there are loads of supernumerary characters, ones who are surplus to requirements. Mary just wants to give birth; there's no room in the inn; they are in an animal shed; and all these characters who exceed what is necessary, required or desired are all of the sudden part of labor and delivery. But in our Christmas Pageant and Nativity Scenes, it's the angels, the shepherds and the cattle who make the nice warm fuzzy Christmas story we all know and love. It's those supernumerary characters played by our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews who make Christmas so incredibly special.

Well, guess what? Mary and the Baby Jesus might be at the center of the Christmas story...but so are those supernumerary characters. When you look at the Christmas story in Luke's Gospel from a literary perspective, it becomes very obvious that the main character is the SHEPHERDS!!

- The Angels visit and speak to the Shepherds.
- The Shepherds visit the Holy Family.

- The Shepherds go and tell what they had heard and seen.

Those characters who seem to exceed what is necessary, required or desired...well, it's actually their story.

Unfortunately, outside of Luke's Gospel – and the grandchildren who can't yet read lines or the kids not cute enough to play Mary & Joseph – the Shepherds in particular don't get much attention. When looking at Nativity Scene art, it's the Holy Family and the Wise Men. If there are more characters, it's usually animals ... with no one taking care of them! The perfect time to have Shepherds! The Wise Men feature much more prominently than the Shepherds...and they didn't even show up for about 3 years!

In Luke's Gospel – the Christmas Story that we know and love the most – it's all about the Shepherds!! But they don't seem to get our attention to the degree that they deserve. We like to focus on the "high profile" people, like the Wise Men because they brought fancy gifts...even though they don't even feature in Luke's Gospel. The fact is: The Shepherds are the most important people in this story next to the Holy Family, and they are the main characters, yet they are treated as supernumerary.

Let's look at what the Shepherds did, what made them so amazing. After the Angels sang to them, the Shepherds said to one another, *"Let's go to Bethlehem and see what's up."*

- So, they went with haste and found Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.
- Then, they told Mary and Joseph that the Angels told them that the Baby Jesus was the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. Y'know...they knew this was a big thing...not something that happens every day...Angels appearing and God coming into the world.
- Then Mary treasured THEIR words. The person who brought God into the material world treasured the words of these ordinary sheep herders.

- And then, the Shepherds went and told everyone else about this amazing event: Jesus, the Son of God, had come into the world!
 - The people who heard it were amazed.
 - The shepherds glorified and praised God.
 - No doubt, their lives were changed forever!

The main characters in this story are the Shepherds – this is their story. And the outcome of their story was to tell the world of the Love that came down at Christmas.

If you read the Gospels, you will quickly discover that those at the center of Jesus' ministry are the supernumerary – those who are considered to exceed what is necessary, required or desired by those who hold power:

- The woman at the well
- The man born blind
- The woman caught in adultery
- The hemorrhaging woman
- The 2 thieves on crosses on either side of Him at The Crucifixion

Why is this important? Because it shows us the kind of people Jesus came into the world for, the kind of people for whom Jesus will be the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. Jesus – who is God – came into the world for the everyday, common person, the person who is just like you and me – for the supernumerary. You are at the center of the Christmas Story. Jesus doesn't belong to the elite, the rich, the powerful. Quite the opposite. Love came down for you!

On behalf of the entire St Stephen's Family, whether you are part of us at this service, or part of us longer term, MERRY CHRISTMAS!