

"UNSCHEDULED INTERRUPTIONS"

TEXT: "The shepherds said to one another, 'Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing that has come to pass". (Luke 2: 15)

INTRODUCTION Mark Twain in his Life on the Mississippi at one point reflects on the mixed sense of gain and of loss that he experienced upon completing his apprenticeship as a river pilot. He makes this observation:

"Now when I had mastered the language of this water, and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as well as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition.

But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the wonder had gone out of this majestic river!"

His words remind us that the familiar has a way of losing its power to enthrall us. This is one of the hazards of Christmas, too. We've been to Bethlehem so many times. Oh, if only we could see from scratch the coming of the infant Jesus and perhaps catch some of the wonder, the glory, and the excitement of it all!

THE SHEPHERDS CAN HELP I'd like to think that the shepherds can help us in this regard. You know the ones I mean, the shepherds of whom it was written:

"And there were in the same country, shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night".

These nameless, unnumbered herdsmen have long held a grip on our affections and our admiration. Rugged, rustic, strong, silent, out-door types make an appeal to us. Somehow it pleases us to think that the "good news" of the Saviour's birth was broken first to these shepherds in the hills around Bethlehem, and not to the priests and the scholars in the dimly-lit, musty rooms of the Temple in Jerusalem. We're reminded in this that religious professionals have no monopoly on the truth.

Chances are that in the social and religious scheme of things back then these shepherds were under-dogs. Their manners and their speech tended toward the rougher side of life. They weren't able to keep the Sabbath with any regularity. They had their chores to tend to. Their enforced absence from the high festal occasions in Jerusalem made them veritable outcasts with the socially acceptable. By such the angel songs were heard that night.

MET TRUTH HALF WAY But there's still another reason why these men make their appeal to us. They possessed a trait that is worthy of our consideration and emulation. And here I have in mind their way of dealing with unscheduled interruptions, their willingness to go out and meet truth half way. "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass".

I'm sure it was not the custom of these men to leave their sheep on short notice and go running into town. They had a job to do, a living to earn, and even though they labored in the out-of-doors, their work had its routine, the way all

was there no sick friend who ever needed your help? No elderly person who would have been cheered by a visit from you? No bereaved neighbor who would have been lifted by your presence and your faith? No alcoholic who needed you to pour a hot cup of black coffee? Even a routine - you see - that is solemnized because it is tied to the church can be a routine that blinds us to a larger opportunity.

Remember that the knock that interrupts could be the knock of God. When Moses was grasped by the sight of the burning bush, he turned aside to see, and when the shepherds heard the angel voices, they raced to Bethlehem to see what it was all about. How well do we handle our unscheduled interruptions? (Pause///)

OUR WORLD VIEW Let's go on now and reflect on the fact that we all have a world-view. We've wrestled with the connectedness of things. We don't start a new day void of categories, letting each idea and experience tumble incoherently upon us - unranked, ungraded, uncriticized. Our minds help to sort things out and give us a sense of the whole. Our minds help us to coordinate reality. Some things are good and some bad, so we have deduced. Some happenings are possible, some are not. Some values are worth gaining and defending, others hardly matter. Some ideas are worthy of pursuit, others should be ignored. Some people we should seek to cultivate, others we should avoid. We all have what we might call a world-view. Some might call it a theology. For as someone has pointed out:

"Every man has his priorities - phone calls he'll take, and people he'll see, things he'll do. That's his theology. It may be bad theology, but every man, woman and child is a theologian".

I think the danger is that our out-look, our world-view, our philosophy, our theology - call it what you will - can harden prematurely. We can shut-off the intake valve too soon and thus lose our openness. We bring our verdicts to life events. We're like the child who upon seeing a giraffe at the zoo for the first time, said, "Why, there ain't no such animal" - and went his way! We're like that in certain respects.

Now suppose the shepherds had engaged in such premature closure. Suppose they had said from their world-view, "There's no such thing as an angel", or "nothing is more important than our work...we can't leave it....", or "when the Messiah comes, He will not come as a little child....and born in a stable in Bethlehem? Never?"

So think about this: with what degree of cordiality do we meet new ideas and new experiences and new people? Relate it to your own life. For instance, you've concluded that all poor people are lazy, or that those on welfare are dishonest or simply lacking in initiative. Here are facts to discount such theories. Will you read them and think about them? All whites are in a conspiracy to oppress blacks. Here is testimony that says "not so". Will you come and examine it? Or, there is no such thing as "faith-healing!" A man cured by prayer says, "Come and see". Will you go? Communication with the departed dead is impossible. Here are those who contend otherwise. Will you hear them? The point is this: it is so much easier for us to stay with the sheep we know, the job we can handle, the system we have built, the truth we have fixed in our minds - than it is to expose ourselves to some unscheduled interruptions.

Think of this, too, in regard to people. One of the dividends to me of city living lies in the rich diversity of our contacts. The dullness of so many suburbs is traceable to the absence of variety. The new keeps knocking on our doors in a

work does. I think it's fair to say that it was no easier for them to get away from their work than it would be for any of us. We all live with the myth, if you will, of vocational indispensability.

From their starting point - not from our viewing point - they did not know that anything would come of this exciting venture. Hindsight confers on them a wisdom of the highest order. But that night as they raced across the Judean hills toward Bethlehem in response to an angelic word, they must have questioned their sanity and wondered if their hearing was in order. The implausibility of it all!

COMMUNICATION: TWO-WAY MATTER

Consider this event from another angle, too. The outstanding characteristic of the God revealed in the Bible is that He speaks. He declares Himself in words, in events, in human life through people. I think we're mindful of this, but are we sensitive to the fact that communication is a two-way street, that it involves transmission and also reception. Had the shepherds not picked up the signal that night - what then? They would have missed out.

Is our need more light? Or, is our need for a more abandoned response to the light that came and comes and keeps on coming to man even today? God's light is not irresistible. Its efficacy depends in large measure on the hospitality that we accord it in our lives. The strongest signal in the world will not convert to music in your radio unless you tune it in. By the same token, we can miss out on some of God's music if we're not tuned in for it. The shepherds were tuned in and said to each other, "Let us go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass".

UNSCHEDULED INTERRUPTIONS

How well do we handle our unscheduled interruptions? We all have our routines, and what nervous wrecks some of us would be if we didn't have them - even more nervous and tense than we are now. How little we would achieve without routine. But when we make of our routine a security blanket, or allow ourselves to become so tied to our schedules, we stand to lose out on a lot in life. Sometimes we would do well to push our schedules to one side and follow some of our better impulses.

One thinks of the Priest and the Levite in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, hurrying along to keep what must have been an important engagement, missing out on the call of God as it reached for them through the groans and cries of an injured brother. Or, one thinks of Martha so engrossed in the preparation of a meal in her kitchen in Bethany while the Master graced her living room.

Some of you may remember how our churches sought to encourage faithfulness in Sunday School attendance by passing out pins and bars in what was known as the Cross and Crown system of awards. Remember it? It wasn't too long ago. And I wouldn't be at all surprised to find out that some of you have some of these pins and bars stashed away in a drawer, in the place reserved for keepsakes and momentos. Now I must be careful for no minister should ever knock a plan that sought to bring people into regular weekly contact with the Lord and with the Bible. Nevertheless, that system of awards did give some Protestants the feeling that perfect attendance on a Sunday was all that was required of them.

I can remember some folks who had the pins and bars (one for every perfect year) that reached half way down to their waist. I've always been inclined to gently needle such folks, asking them: in all the Sundays represented by that pin,

metropolitan center in a way that it is not likely to do out yonder in some small, green, homogenized community. ~~I think~~ it is well for us to strike out from the paths of easiest resistance in dealing with each other, and work a little harder to form relationships that have a different pattern and direction. What opportunities we have to do this in a place like New York!

BACK TO THE SHEPHERDS

Back to the shepherds once again and this final observation. What the shepherds saw that night was uniquely theirs to see. We do not need another Christ, another Sermon on the Mount, another crucifixion, another resurrection. Nevertheless, their disposition and their example toward the new, toward the unscheduled interruption holds an important lesson for all of us.

It is our faith that Christ still comes in life experiences - with ideas and with people. When the bush glows, look at it. When the angel speaks, listen and be willing to leave the sheep you know so well. Rise and follow. For no routine, however tried, is bigger than life itself. And no system of thought, however, comprehensive, is true than life. How said it could be when we come to the end of our days to discover that we have not really lived.

"The shepherds said to one another, 'Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing that has come to pass'"

PRAYER

O God, as we prepare ourselves to remember once again the visit that thou didst once make to this wayside planet, open our eyes that we may see thy presence everywhere. Make us sensitive to the things of the spirit that in our lives, crowded as they are, we may accord hospitality to the highest and best man has ever known. Spare us the folly of hiding out from Thee behind our tight little schedules and our closed off minds.

Give us the venturesomeness that belongs to people of great faith; the humility to revise ourselves, and the deep joy of discovery. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

"ON HANDLING UNSCHEDULED INTERRUPTIONS"

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INTRODUCTION Mark Twain in his Life on the Mississippi reflects on the mixed sense of gain and of loss that he felt upon completing his apprenticeship as a river pilot. He comments in this way:

"Now when I had mastered the language of this water, and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as well as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition.

But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of this majestic river".

It's true that the familiar has a way of losing its power to enthrall us. As I see it, this is one of the cardinal hazards of Christmas. We've been to Bethlehem so many times. Oh, if only we could see from scratch the coming of the infant Jesus, and perhaps catch some of the wonder, the glory, the excitement of it all.

THE SHEPHERDS CAN HELP Perhaps the shepherds could help us towards this end, the shepherds of whom it was written:

"And there were in the same country, shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night".

These nameless and unnumbered herdsmen have long held a grip on our affections. Strong, silent, rustic, weatherbeaten types appeal to us. Somehow it pleases us to think that the "good news" of the saviour's birth was broken first to those shepherds in the hills of Bethlehem and not to the priests and scholars in the musty halls of Jerusalem's Temple. Religious professionals have no monopoly on truth.

We warm to them as well because in the social and religious scheme of things these shepherds were under-dogs. Their manners and speech tended toward the rougher side of life; they weren't able to keep the Sabbath with any regularity. Their enforced absences from the high holy days at the Temple made them veritable outcasts. By such the angelsongs were heard that night.

MET THE TRUTH HALF WAY But let's push on and suggest that beyond grounds for admiration and affection, these shepherds possessed a trait that is worthy of our consideration. Their ability to deal with unscheduled interruptions, their willingness to meet the truth half way - this is what I have in mind. "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass."

It was not the custom of the shepherds to leave their sheep on short notice to go to town; they had a job to do, a living to earn, and even though they labored in open spaces their work had its routine - all work does. I think it's fair to say that they had no easier time getting away than any of us would. We all

live with the myth of vocational indispensability.

From their starting point, not our viewing point, they did not know that anything would come of this mad venture. Hindsight confers on them a wisdom of the highest order. But that night as they ran across the Judean hills in response to an angelic word, they must surely have questioned their sanity and their voices. The implausibility of it all.

COMMUNICATION: TWO-WAY MATTER We need to remember that one of the outstanding characteristics of the God revealed in Scripture is that He speaks. He declares Himself in words and in events through people. But communication is a two-way affair. It involves transmission and reception. Had the shepherds not picked up the signal that night, what then?

It raises a question. Is our need for more light? Or, is our need for a more abandoned response to the light that once came and comes and keeps on coming to man even today? God's light is not irresistible. Its efficacy depends on a large measure on the hospitality that we accord it in our lives. The strongest signal in the world will not convert to music in your radio unless you tune it in. And by the same token, we can miss out on some of God's music if we're not tuned in to receive it. "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing that has come to pass."

UNSCHEDULED INTERRUPTIONS How well do you and I handle our unscheduled interruptions? We all have our routines, and what nervous wrecks we'd be without them...more nervous than we already are. How little we would achieve without routine. But when we make of our routine a security blanket or allow ourselves to become slaves of our schedules we stand to lose out on a lot of good things in life.

I think of the priest and the Levite in Jesus' story, hurrying to keep what must have been an important engagement - missing out on the call of God as it reached out to them from an injured brother. I think of Martha engrossed in the preparations of a meal out in the kitchen of her home while the Master was gracing her living room. Jesus reminded Martha that Mary had chosen the better part. Are there not times when a meal might better be omitted, or at least delayed?

Some of you may remember how our churches (not too long ago) sought to encourage faithfulness in Sunday School attendance by passing out pins and bars in what was known as the Cross and Crown System of awards. It wouldn't surprise me if some of you had some of those pins stashed away in some drawer reserved for keepsakes and mementos. I use to have some of the myself. No minister should knock a plan that sought to bring people into regular contact with the Scriptures, but nevertheless, that system of awards did give many Protestants the feeling that perfect attendance was all that was required of them in terms of churchmanship. I'd say that's only the beginning.

I've known one or two people who had those pins and bars reaching almost to the waist, and I confess to you that I've been tempted to gently ask them: in all the Sundays represented by those pins - did no sick friend need you to stand by? Did no prisoner long for a visit from you? Did no elderly saint want earnestly to see you? Was there no alcoholic whom you knew who wanted you to pour him a cup of black coffee, or no person in the hospital who might have benefited from your visit. Even a routine - you see - that is solemnized because it's tied to the church can be a routine that blinds us to a larger opportunity. (sanctified)

Remember that the knock that interrupts could be the knock of God. When Moses was grasped by the sight of a bush on fire, he turned aside to see. The shepherds when they heard the angel voices rose up, ran and followed. (pause)

OUR WORLD VIEW We all have some world-view. We have wrestled with the connectedness of things. We don't start each day void of categories - letting each idea and experience move in upon us unranked, ungraded and uncriticized. This is what the mind is for - to help us arrange and coordinate reality, to provide us with a synthesis, to give us a sense of the whole. Some things are good, some bad, we have deduced. Some happenings are possible, some are not. Some values are worth gaining and defending, others hardly matter. Some ideas should be better know, others should be ignored or extinguished. Some people we should cultivate, others we should suspect or even see as adversaries.

In a sense, every man has a theology. David Redding, a fellow pastor, has written:

"Every man has his priorities, phone calls he'll take, people he'll see, things he'll do. That is his theology. It may be bad theology, but every man, woman and child is a theologian"

The danger, of course, is that our outlook, our world-view, our philosophy or theology - call it what you will - can harden prematurely. We can shut off the intake valve too soon and thus lose our openness. We can live altogether deductively instead of inductively. How often we bring our own verdicts to the events of life. I recall hearing of a child who saw a giraffe for the first time at a zoo and said flatly, "There ain't no such animal".

Suppose the shepherds had engaged in such premature closure. Suppose they had said from their world-view: "There's no such thing as an angel", or "nothing is more important than our work...we can't leave it...", or "when the Messiah comes, he will not come as a little child....born in a stable? Never!"

So, think about this: with what cordiality do we meet new ideas, new people, new experiences? Relate it to your own life. For instance, you've concluded that all poor people are lazy, or that those on welfare are dishonest, or simply lacking in initiative. Here are some facts to discount such theories. Will you read them, consider them. Or, is your mind closed. All whites are in a conspiracy to oppress blacks. Here is testimony that says "not so". Will you come and examine it? Or, there is no such thing as "faith healing". A man cured by faith, by prayer says, "come and see". How do you respond? I think the point is this: it is so much easier for us to stay with the sheep we know - with the job we can handle - the system we have built - the truth we have fixed in our minds - than it is to expose ourselves to some unscheduled interruptions.

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It is our faith that the Christ-event still comes in life's experiences - with people, with ideas, with events. When the bush glows, look at it and reflect upon it. When the angel speaks, leave the sheep you know so well - rise up and follow. No routine, however tried, is bigger than life. No system of thought, however comprehensive, is truer than life. And what a tragedy it would be for us when we come to ~~die~~ to discover that we have not really lived. "Let us go unto Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass".

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to the things of the spirit, that in our lives, crowded as they are, we may accord hospitality to the highest and the best that mankind has ever witnessed. Spare us the folly of hiding out from thee behind our tight little schedules and our closed minds.

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