

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 reflects at one point on the mixed sense of gain and of loss that was his upon completing his apprenticeship as a river pilot. He offers 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, beauty and wonder had gone out of this majestic river".

His words remind us that the familiar has a way of losing its power to stir us and enthrall us. It's one of the hazards of Christmas. We've been to Bethlehem many, many times. I've often thought - oh, if only we could see from scratch the coming of the infant Jesus and perhaps catch some of the wonder, some of the glory, the thrill of it all. The familiar does have a way of robbing us of the joy and excitement that is there.

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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 Savior's birth was broken first to these shepherds in the hills around Bethlehem, and not to the priests and scholars in those dimly-lit, musty rooms of the Temple up in Jerusalem. Religious professionals have no monopoly on the truth.

Chances are that in the social and religious scheme of things back then that these shepherds were under-dogs. Their manners and their speech tended toward the rougher side of life. They might not have felt at home in some of our churches. They weren't able to keep the Sabbath with any regularity. They had their chores to do. They were absent from the high holy days and festal occasions in Jerusalem. By such the angel songs were heard that night.

MET TRUTH HALF WAY

There's still another reason why these shepherds make their appeal to us. They possessed a trait that is worthy of our consideration. I have in mind their way of dealing with some 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 work does. I think it's fair to say that it was no easier for them to break 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's manger in response to an angelic word, they must have questioned their sanity and wondered if their hearing was in order.

COMMUNICATION: TWO-WAY MATTER Consider this event from another angle. 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. We're mindful of this, but are we fully sensitive to the fact that communication is something of a "two-way" street - that it involves both transmission and reception.

Had the shepherds not picked up the signal that night - what then? They would have missed out.

One wonders: is our need for more light? Or, is our need for a more abandoned response to the light that came long ago and comes and keeps on coming to mankind 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. And by the same token we can miss out on some of God's great music if we're not tuned in to receive it. Are you tuned in? Are you making it possible by clearing out some of the clutter in your life and your schedule to hear the song of the angels this Christmas.

The shepherds were "tuned in" and said to one another,

"Let us go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing that has come to pass....."

UNSCHEDULED INTERRUPTIONS All of this is leading on to this question: how well do we handle our unscheduled interruptions? We all have our routines, mind you, 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 something of a little security blanket or allow ourselves to become so tied to our schedules, we stand to lose out on an awful lot in life.

I believe that sometimes we would do well to push our schedules over to one side and follow some of our better impulses. One of these days I'm going to practice what I preach in this regard and see where some of those impulses and interruptions lead me. You may see me burst my little bud of calm and blossom into hysteria.

One thinks of the Priest and the Levite in the 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 little kitchen in Bethany while the Master graced her living room. Oh, Martha, Martha....what you missed. Mary chose the better part.

Some of us need to remember than even a routine that is solemnized because it is tied to some aspect of the Church can be a routine that blinds us to the larger opportunity, to the greater good.

Remember that the knock that interrupts could be the knock of God on your time, your life, your energy. 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?

#### WORLD VIEW

Let's take this a step or two further 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 just tumble incoherently in upon us - unranked, ungraded, uncriticized. Our minds help to sort things out...coordinate reality, give us a sense of the whole.

Some things are good and some are bad, so we have deduced. Some happenings are possible, some are not. Some values are worth gaining, defending and others are not. Some ideas are worthy of pursuit, some should be ignored. Some people we should seek to cultivate, others we should avoid. We all have what we call a world view. Some might call it a theology.

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" that little ol' in-take valve too soon and thus lose our openness. We may be in danger of bringing our verdicts to life events...too soon.

We're like the child who was taken to the zoo by his father and upon seeing a giraffe for the first time, said, "Why, there ain't so such animal" and went his way. Some of us at times are a bit like that.

#### SUPPOSE THE SHEPHERDS

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". "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! You've got to be kidding."

So think about this: with what degree of cordiality do we meet new ideas and new experiences and new people? Think of it in terms of your own life. For instance, you don't believe in "faith-healing". A person cured by prayer says, "Come and see". Will you go? Or, here are some facts to discount your opinion. Are you willing to look at them or is your mind closed, shut-tight. The point is this: it is so much easier for us to stay with the sheep we know, the system we have built, the truth that's fixed in our minds...than it is to expose

ourselves to some new "unscheduled interruption", some unexpected insight, some new truth that God may be trying to share with us.

And think of this in regard to people. One of the dividends of city life 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 city like NY in a way that it is not likely to do out yonder in some small, green homogenized community. I enjoy this mix of people we have in a city like this, and in a church like ours. I believe it's well for us to strike out from those little paths of easiest resistance in dealing with each other and work a little harder to form lasting relationships that have different patterns and directions.

It's good for us to be in touch with those who think a little bit differently than we do, whose "world-view" and "theology" may be different than ours. We shouldn't be fearful of it. Remember that all of God's truth is one, and that all of us belong to Him and are His children. What opportunities we have to do this in a place like New York City.

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 in responding, their reaction to their 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, in ways and in events that we don't expect or anticipate. When the bush glows, look at it. When the angel speaks, listen. Be willing to leave the sheep you know so well. Rise up and follow. For no routine, however tried, is bigger than life itself. No system of thought, however comprehensive, is truer than life. How sad it could be when we come to the end of our days on earth to discover that we have not really lived.

And so, dear friend, whoever you are. Whatever your name or background...as you brush up against Eternal Truth once again in the coming days of this glorious season, let us remember the example of those shepherds and how they responded, saying to each other:

"Let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass and which the Lord has made known to us...."

PRAYER      At times our lives become so crowded that little room is left to accord hospitality to the highest and the best that mankind has ever known. Make us deeply sensitive to the things of the spirit in these coming days.

Spare us the folly of hiding out from Thee behind our tight little schedules and our closed-off minds. Give to each of us, Lord Jesus, that venturesomeness that belongs to those people of great faith, the humility to revise ourselves and the deep joy of discovery. All in the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen

"UNSCHEDULED INTERRUPTIONS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 14, 1997

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