

"UNSCHEDULED INTERRUPTIONS"

A Sermon By

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## "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

In his Life On the Mississippi, Mark Twain reflects on the mixed sense of gain and of loss that was his upon completing his apprenticeship as a river pilot. Offering this observation, he writes,

"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."

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 and thrill of it all. Yes, the familiar does have a way of robbing us of the joy and excitement that is certainly there.

### THE SHEPHERDS CAN HELP US

I'd like to think that the shepherds can help us in this regard. You know the ones I mean, those 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 and admiration. Rugged, rustic, strong and 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 first broken 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. Remember: religious professionals have no monopoly on the truth.

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 might not have felt at home in some of our churches. They weren't able to keep the Sabbath with any regularity. They had 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

But 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. It was no easier for them to break away from their work than it would be for any of us. I think 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 after-dark 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....wondered if their hearing was in the best of order.

COMMUNICATION: A TWO-WAY MATTER

Consider this event from another angle. The outstanding characteristic of the God of 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 does involve both transmission and reception.

Had the shepherds not "picked up" on the signal that night, what then? The chances are that they would have missed out. Which makes one wonder: 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 covert 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 which leads me to ask or to raise this question.

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. Yes, those 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

Are you "tuned in?" And to that question, add this one. how well do we handle our unscheduled interruptions? Oh, 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 there are those moments in life when 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 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. But it should be fun! Right?

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 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! May chose the better part.

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

Remember that the knock that interrupts could be the knock of God on your life, your time, 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 dropped what they were doing....and raced to Bethlehem to see what it was all about. A place the question gently on your heart: how well do you handle your unscheduled interruptions?

#### TAKE IT A STEP FURTHER

Let's take this a step or two further and admit that we all have a "world view". We've wrestled with the "connectedness of things". Some we have inherited from parents and grandparents. We don't just start a new day void of categories, letting each idea and experience just tumble in upon us....unranked, ungraded and uncriticized. Our minds help to sort things out, coordinating reality, giving us a sense of the "whole".

Some things are good. 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 and others we should avoid. Call it your "world view", but we all have one. 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...but it can harden prematurely. We can "shut-off" that little old, 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 no such animal!" ...and went his way. I know people like that. I have relatives 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. When the Messiah comes, He will not come as a little child, and born in a stable....NEVER...you've got to be kidding."

So...think about this...with what degree of cordiality do you and I meet new ideas and new experiences and new people? Think of it in terms of your life.

For instance, you don't believe in "faith healing"? A person cured by prayer says, "Come and see". Are you willing to 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 is fixed in our minds...than it is to expose ourselves to some "unscheduled interruption", some unexpected insight, some new truth that God may be trying to share with us.

Think of this in regard to people. One of the dividends of city life is to be found in the rich diversity of our contacts. The new keeps knocking on our doors in a city like this in a way that it is not likely to do out yonder in some small, green "homogenized" community. I enjoy the mix of people we have in a city like this and in a church like this. I believe it is well for us to strike out from those little paths of easiest resistance in dealing with each other and work harder to form lasting relationships that have different patterns and directions. It is 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 from our own. Do not be fearful of it and remember that all of God's truth is one and all of us belong to Him and are His children.

#### BACK TO THE SHEPHERDS

But back to the shepherds for a few moments 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, their example in responding, their reaction to "their" unscheduled interruption holds a very important lesson for us.

It is our faith that Christ still comes in life's experiences...with ideas, with people, in ways and events that we don't always 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 and tested, is bigger than life itself. How sad it could be when we come to the end of our days on earth to discover that we have not really lived.

Recently I came across these words by Ann Weems and wish to share them.

"It is not over, this birthing....

There are always newer skies into which God can throw stars.

When we begin to think that we can predict the Advent of God, that we can box the Christ in a stable in Bethlehem,

That's just the time that God will be born, in a place we can't imagine and won't believe.

Those who wait for God watch in their hearts and not their eyes....listening, always listening for angel words....."

It would seem we live in yet another time when all humanity yearns for another birthing of the Prince of Peace. And yet, as these words remind us, we need but listen with the heart and the angel words can be heard again. And then we are all asked to return to the scenes of our daily lives and to let the words become flesh again in our lives. What a challenge. Yet, what a joy!

PRAYER

As we "brush up" against Eternal Truth once again in these coming days, O God.....let us remember the example of the shepherds and how they responded....and followed. Make each of us deeply sensitive to the things of the spirit in these coming days. Spare us the folly of hiding out from You behind our tight little schedules and our closed-off minds.

And give to each of us, dear God, that venturesomeness that belongs to people of great faith, the humility to revise ourselves, if necessary....and the deep joy of discovery....and the strength to "rise up and follow". All of this in the name and spirit of our Lord, Jesus...born in Bethlehem's manger long ago. Amen.