

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Dec 25th 2015

The good news came first to shepherds. They didn't live in town but slept side by side with their sheep, carrying the smell of the animals with them always. They would have been less than welcomed in the market stalls in town with their dirt and smell and matted hair. Yet it is these people, living on the margins, who first hear of the birth of the savior. Not only were the terrified shepherds reassured, "Be not afraid," but they were invited to seek out the baby and to be the first to meet this savior face to face.

The shepherds, and all of Israel, had been waiting for centuries for the messiah who would save them from this very hard life. In today's first reading, Isaiah writes of a "people who walk in darkness" and a "land of gloom." The people in Isaiah's time, in Jesus' time, and in our own, faced wars, brutal governments, constant battles and a wondering if they would ever be safe. Yet Isaiah promises them – and us – hope. Into that darkness, a light has shown. Our burdens will be lifted and rejoicing will be ours.

Luke's gospel describes how the oppressive Roman government who now ruled their land, wanted a census of all of those who lived there. So Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem, an arduous journey for a woman fully pregnant. They left home, family and friends to comply with the Roman order. Adding hardship to their trip, crowds in the city meant they had to stay in a stable, where an exhausted Mary finally gave birth. Into that stable, the dirty shepherds straggled in, sleepless, wide-eyed and as humble as anyone can imagine.

We might not always think "Humble," when we think of our Christmas celebrations today. We spend extra effort for special occasions and might splurge a little in spending or time to make it exceptional. But as we celebrate this day, we will find our true "peace on earth" and the Light shining into our lives if we embrace humility in the midst of today's joy. We have to remember that it is not about us.

If my Christmas celebration is not "perfect" or all of my hard work seems under-appreciated, I can draw on the humility of the shepherds, remember that Jesus is with me in every moment of this day, and whisper to myself, "A light has shown."

When family tensions rise at the dinner table or yet another toddler falls apart in furious wails at the celebration, instead of snapping impatiently, I can ask for humility and serenity and silently pray, "On earth, Peace."

Too often I might be stretched and frazzled by the time people gather and I'm not in the mood to ask for patience. It is into this very moment that Jesus can enter my life so deeply. Jesus has come into my life for the challenging moments as well as the wonderful ones and I am often more aware of my own need for a savior when I am not at my best. When I am disappointed or angry or frustrated at those around me, that is when I can pause and remember how much Jesus longs to hold me close and enfold me with his love. He isn't waiting for me to behave better to love me, he is loving me right now. And that is a deeply comforting thought.

On this Christmas Day, when everything glitters, we can take a moment to imagine ourselves in the midst of the smell and noise of the stable and the shepherds. Like them, we are being called to meet

our Savior and to rejoice.

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