

## **What Are Angels Doing Out in a Pasture?**

**Luke 2:8-14**

**(Fourth Sunday in Advent –Dec. 23, 2007**

That would have been an unforgettable experience for those drowsy and bored farm workers: a choir of angels singing right out there in their pasture, for God's sake. And wasn't it nice that they were singing about peace?

Of course one could probably raise the question as to what did angels know. One wouldn't necessarily expect "heavenly hosts" to be experts on "peace on earth," on how difficult it is to achieve, on all of the barriers to peace, all of its problems and daunting complexities.

For that matter, "What on earth," one could wonder, "is the relevance or even the good sense to singing about peace to a handful of shepherds?" Shepherds weren't exactly on the cutting edge of setting military policy, for example, nor experts on international conflict resolution, nor were they guardians of domestic tranquility. Shepherds were entry-level farm workers who dealt mainly with docile, placid, irenic sheep, and they did so in remote, quiet, bucolic surroundings.

Looked at that way, it begins to feel a little like that old vaudeville routine that most of you probably recall. It's the one where the scene is a street corner at night. A man is stumbling around under a streetlight obviously searching the ground for something or other.

A passing policeman stops and asks what the problem is. The man's answer is that he has lost his house keys. Trying to be helpful, the officer begins to search with him but to no avail. After a couple minutes he asks the man if he is absolutely certain that this is where he dropped the keys. The man answers "No," and pointing off into the darkness says, "They had to have fallen from my pocket over there, but there's no light over there so I'm looking over here where there is."

One could argue that sending an angelic choir to sing songs about peace to shepherds out in a sheep pasture is just a bit like that. If God wanted to get something going in the way of peace on earth, why out here with those shepherders? Surely it would have made more sense to break in upon Herod, Caesar Augustus or Tiberius in their council chambers -- talk and preach to THEM about peace. They, after all, were the ones who were supposed to maintain order, head off disorder, prevent breaches of the peace, and forestall disruptions and turmoil.

Might it be, though, that what this part of the story is, is a "word from God" regarding the level at which peace on earth needs to be addressed; how and where on earth it has to happen if it happens.

For when one steps back and looks at all of the political posings, all of the enforcements that were supposed to prevent conflict and disaccord, all of the accumulated deterrent power that kings and Caesars, prime ministers, presidents, generals and secretaries of state have brought to bear, none of that has worked. The most that any of the negotiations, deterrents, warnings, retaliations or disincentives tried ever seem able to achieve are brief, uneasy, lulls in the conflict and combat. Even when someone wins a war –when one nation triumphs over another – they never seem to win peace. Go back and look. All they seem to win is the privilege of soon being embroiled in a follow-up conflict.

Most of you remember the old Christmas song (“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day”) that laments that fact in one of its lines. It says “...and in despair I bowed my head. There IS no peace on earth!’ I said.”

Again, could it be that this odd scenario in which angels take their message to farm workers instead of to kings, governors, generals and the like, is “an acted-out sermon” to us about where and how the “peace-on-earth” problem” HAS to be addressed. The philosopher, Spinoza, may have said it most clearly of all. “Peace,” Spinoza said, “is NOT an absence of war. Peace is a human virtue. It is a state of mind, a benevolent bias, a disposition toward justice and trust.”

That could mean that we are kidding ourselves if we think of peace on earth as something that comes about or fails to, mainly apart from you and me; that it has chiefly to do with skilled diplomats, hard-nosed leaders, treaties with lots of teeth in them, intimidating deterrents and superior military power. Maybe, something like the title of the old country=and-western tune, “Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places;” the angels-and-shepherds story hints that we are, “looking for peace in all the wrong ways and places.”

Yes, if “peace on earth” isn’t working in our world or nation or society, it could be, couldn’t it, that to an extent to which we aren’t aware, you and I are not exactly peaceful persons? It’s not that we are “war-like” or “war-mongers” in any usual sense of those words, but maybe more than we realize, over time we’ve accommodated, internalized, excused and accepted as normal, a set of internal, well-reasoned hostilities, seemingly justified resentments, and faintly paranoid assumptions that permeate much or most of the spirit of us.

Try to listen objectively sometime to the hostility-laced rhetoric that, apropos of nothing will spew forth in a table conversation, bull sessions from talk-show callers, letters to editors, and elsewhere. See if you don’t pick up, not only from the content of what is said, but often from the hostile and derisive “edge” to the voice, that a lot of people feel victimized, deeply resentful and “under siege” because, for example, of Hispanic immigrants, the Chinese, the

gas and utility companies, the big oil interests, and a whole pandemic of other encroaching evil human forces.

If you listen carefully you'll discover that ostensibly good people nevertheless see themselves as constant, chronic victims of gross and blatant exploitation by bureaucrats, betrayals by politicians, conspiracies of the media or maybe of the Pentagon.

Yes, and I am, am I not, also being robbed by food-stamp recipients, by the legal establishment, or by the health care system, by anyone and everyone who taxes my income? Evil, insidious adversaries, they are: those "political left-wingers," for example (or make that "political right-wingers" if you prefer), the "hawks," or perhaps those treasonous cowards who want to "cut-and-run," the vast array of others who hold unpardonably, twisted position and opinions, who therefore by their very existence assault my sound, reasonable, intelligent sensibilities.

And all of THAT is afloat upon a sea of flaming headlines, scandal features, films, warnings of new dangers and disasters that make it impossible for me to be a peaceful person. INFANT MURDERED WITH MICROWAVE OVEN, BISHOP INDICTED FOR TWO DECADES OF SEXUAL ABUSE, GANG KILLS STUDENT IN COLLEGE DORM OVER DRUGS, SERIAL KILLINGS IN SOUTH FLORIDA, TEEN PUSHED IN FRONT OF SUBWAY TRAIN, WORKER FALLS EIGHT FLOORS IN CAR, POLICE ACCUSED OF BEATING A MAN IN RESTRAINTS. It's the daily tsunami ravaging our senses.

So notwithstanding the fact that peace and good will among people of earth is an ideal for virtually all of us, and none of us think that rancor, violence, malice, exploitation, and vindictiveness are good, that doesn't mean that we have succeeded in remaining peaceful persons. Few if any of us may be overtly contentious or suspicious or vengeful or belligerent or bigoted, but in a world and time like ours, it nevertheless demands an extraordinary amount of self-awareness, self-honesty, insight, large-spiritedness and frankly: repentance, to be and stay a person of good will and at peace. It definitely doesn't happen naturally and it certainly isn't true simple because I tell myself that it is.

That is so, not only because of our human vulnerability. It's also because there is a lot about our life together – our society – that depends heavily on our NOT being peaceful people. Our economic system needs our discontent, for example. Our political realm counts upon our staying anxious about the future. And much of religion thrives upon our insecurity, our guilt, and our sense of being subverted by and at war with invisible forces of evil. And they are expert at evoking it.

It is all of that which is alluded to in a line in one of our hymns that says, “O God, in restless living we lose our spirit’s peace.” Exactly! And reversing that requires intentionality on our part and constant attention.

That’s what I take from that story about an incident in that ancient pasture that night. Apparently even ancient shepherds had their own peace problems: had to struggle to be hopeful, had sources of alienation that kept them from feeling at home in their world, were driven in troubling ways because they didn’t feel respected, taken seriously, forgiven, relevant, “whatever.” It’s a common problem.

This wasn’t then, a story about some kind of divine-but-misplaced pep rally in support of theoretical peace (truce talks, or an international armistice, or demilitarization, as good as those are if and when they work for a while). No, the word here: “peace and good will to HUMAN Beings with whom God is pleased,” is a word of reassurance that God is pleased, not enraged with us. We can calm down and be at peace with ourselves, with each other and with God.

For most of us, though, that probably entails a substantial journey inward to face and then uproot any number of large and small bad habits of the soul; that is, of outlook, of thought and of assumption. It’s all of the accumulated garbage that blocks the very peace that, at some level of my soul, I really do want and aspire to.

It should entail, for example, my ridding myself from the “them” versus “us” way of viewing my human surroundings and experiences. It may mean changes in myself to where violence holds no fascination for me and I come to see the salacious films, videos, and DVDs as being as stupid, banal and boring as in fact they are. For some of us it could require reworking our understanding to where what makes me feel good about myself is drawing close to someone rather than coming out ahead of him. If it isn’t already part of my understanding, I’ll need to get to where my understanding of what it is to be rich isn’t to having accumulated a lot of stuff but rather when I have very few needs. I will be a source of peace in our life here when I am completely over thinking of gentleness, (for example), forbearance, patience, tolerance and the other tender virtues as signs of weakness or cowardice or lack of real character. I will also have to have become free from the all-too-common mental disorder in which I dismiss those whose opinions are sharply different from my own as being defective or debauched persons.

But you get the principle, don’t you? Stated simply, it’s that when it comes right down to it, the only real source of peace on earth that God has to work with is you and me and other responsive and responsible human beings. Let’s be very certain, then, that we’re a part of it

**and that we are each bringing it to life; doing so for God's sake, yes, but also for our own sake and for the sake of the world and time that we've been given.**