

Sermon for Morning Prayer Christmas Day

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱ

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian. For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.ⁱⁱⁱ

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus [SEE-zar Awe-GUSS-tuss], that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius [sigh-REE-knee-uss] was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because

there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.”^{iv}

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

We tend to think of the Virgin Birth as the principal *a priori* evidence of the divinity of Jesus the Christ. This, after all, is what Isaiah foretold: “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”^v “Immanuel”, as we know from the Gospel, means “God is with us.”^{vi}

And this is, indeed, what happened. The Blessed Virgin Mary conceived by the Holy Ghost and bore a son, whom she named *Yeshua* [**YESH-oo-ah**] or “He will save us”.^{vii} “He will save us” seems to me to be sufficiently close to “God is with us”. “Close enough”, as we say, “for government purposes”, especially when “the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”^{viii}

But think of those poor, bewildered shepherds on the hills outside Bethlehem. It is very unlikely anyone even told them that the baby whom they went to visit had been born to a virgin. Just think, when was the last time you went to visit a newborn where the first topic of conversation was the new mother’s sexual history?

And even if someone had told these particular shepherds that Mary was a virgin, what would have compelled them to believe such a highly unlikely story?

No, they had to have had some other evidence of Jesus’s divinity, some evidence that they would have recognized immediately, some

evidence that they could not possibly have mistaken. And, indeed, they did have precisely such evidence.

Remember when the angel – and St. Luke tells us it was one angel,^{ix} not a group of them – when the angel announced to them the birth of the Christ Child? “And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid.”^x

That was the evidence of the Christ’s divinity that they could not mistake and *that* was why “they were sore afraid”. For, good Jewish men that they were, they knew their Bible and from that, they recognized “the glory of the Lord”, the *Shekinah* [**SHEH-khine-eh**], the blinding light that was the unique sign of the presence of God.

This was the “glory” that showed the people of Israel that God was not only with them on their journey through the wilderness, but that He had chosen Moses to lead them there.^{xi} This was the blazing light that so enveloped Moses as he spoke with God on Mount Sinai that, when he descended again to the people, his face shone with it and they were afraid.^{xii} This was the presence of God that so transfigured Jesus in the presence of Saints Peter, James, and John that he shone like an unearthly light.^{xiii} This was the burst of light that blinded Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus to show him it was the risen Lord who spoke there to him.^{xiv}

Notice that in all these cases, the Hebrews meeting Moses as he descended the mountain, the three Apostles seeing Jesus in the presence of Moses and Elijah, Saul hearing Jesus speak to him on the road, in all these cases, knowledgeable Jews who perceived this particular light immediately knew it for what it was.

Further, as soon as they recognized it, they feared the presence of God which it signified, for to look upon the face of God is death.^{xv}

Perhaps we, who have been given the immeasurable gift of coming into the presence of God each time we celebrate the Eucharist, perhaps we, too, would be less blithe and more fearful if we truly gave thought to what we are then about.

So these shepherds outside Bethlehem saw “the glory of God” and knew it for what it was. And they, being wise men, feared it. They knew it is an awe-filled thing to be in the presence of God, something “not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly; but reverently, discreetly, soberly, and in the fear of God.”

As the angel spoke to them, and “the glory of the Lord shone round about them”, they knew that what the angel spoke was a message to them from God.

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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 9: 2-7 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Luke 2: 1-20 (KJV).*

^{iv} *St. Luke 2: 9 (KJV).*

^v *Isaiah 7: 14 (KJV).*

^{vi} *St. Matthew 1: 23b (KJV).*

^{vii} *HERBERT G. MAY AND BRUCE M. METZGER, EDs., THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA, REVISED STANDARD VERSION 1172 fn. (Oxford University Press 1977). Cf. St. Matthew 1: 21.*

^{viii} *Isaiah 9: 6b (KJV).*

^{ix} *St. Luke 2: 9-13 (KJV).*

^x *St. Luke 2: 9 (KJV).*

^{xi} *Exodus 33: 18-23.*

^{xii} *Exodus 34: 29-35.*

^{xiii} *St. Matthew 17: 1-6; St. Mark 9: 2-8; St. Luke 9: 28-35; II Peter 1: 16-18.*

^{xiv} *Acts 9: 3 & 8.*

^{xv} *Exodus 33: 20.*

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