

No Wonder they Wondered!

Luke 2:1-20

Intro:

Luke, historian that he was, has one sentence and that's all, to summarize the situation surrounding the shepherds' return to their sheep-keeping: "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".

It is no wonder that they wondered at the things shepherds had told them. Shepherds, like mountaineers through all ages, have been known as tellers of tall tales. These rustic sheep-keepers were antiquity's greatest storytellers; but these men, returning so recently to their fields, families, and friends from Bethlehem, really outdid themselves. Can you imagine the impact of the tales they told?

These smelly men of the fields: for years their occupation had been sheep-keeping. Out on the hills of Judah where they worked, "ordinary" was the password. This was the rock-ribbed fortress of routine. For thousands and thousands of nights they had learned how to dream while half asleep and half awake. Then this night of the miracle came bursting upon their scene. What dream was this?

Their silent night was split by a Presence- non-earthly, celestial, and eerie! A glory shined (now I ask you, how does a glory shine)? At midnight there were sights and sounds that no mortal had ever before known. In rapid succession – the voice, the song, the fear! And shepherds jolted awake in the dead of night made haste from their fields to find earth's Saviour...a babe

cradled in a cattle stall. Can you imagine the impact of that tale when they came home to tell it?

No wonder they wondered when the shepherds were through telling that! During twenty long centuries, men have wondered. They have tried their hand at retelling this story. They have told it in music and art and poetry and glass and stone. They have told it in sermon and liturgy; in country churches and great cathedrals. All kinds of craftsmen have adorned and embellished the story, and earth's finest artisans have spent their energies upon it. But John Sutherland Bonnell is right when he says, "Only God could have dreamed the Christmas story".

That says it! Christmas was His Story. Baffling, bewildering, awesome...it was never the shepherds' story, never was our story...it has always been God's story...not man's. No wonder we wonder at the story, wring our hands, scratch our heads and kneel before this awesome truth. No wonder that we cling to every syllable of it, and retell it, especially one time each year. Through all the centuries, the shepherds' story was His story; it was not tailored to meet the demands of a best seller or any public opinion poll.

No wonder they wondered at it! So do we, and we are in good company when we do. Bethlehem means so many things to so many people. But towering over all is one fact: Christmas is a love story. It is a drama of divine-human love with a magnetic tug on all our hearts. One cannot explain the attractiveness of this event apart from the compelling, compassionate, all encompassing love within the story. That is what it is all about. Love created the event apart from the love that we bring to it, or receive from it, Christmas can be as dreary as an all-day drizzle.

No wonder they wondered at it! Look at the love so thoroughly stirred and mingled into the texture of this incredible story. Let us review the loves that are lashed in this event.

I. In the beginning there is the love of a man – an ordinary man – for a woman – and ordinary woman. We almost miss the incredible dimension of the relationship between Joseph, the man, and Mary, the woman. Quite the human, quite ordinary, quite usual, was their love for each other. But Christmas placed an awesome challenge upon them. Their relationship was stretched to the breaking point by this event. They were engaged, not married, when Mary conceived her son. In our day of promiscuous sex, this is not a shocking as it once was.

But for two pious Hebrews in the first century, this was a crisis of unbelievable magnitude. Imagine the questions, the doubts, the misgivings and the confusion that engulfed both of them, especially the man. We could understand it better if Joseph had turned away from Mary and avoided her like a plague. After all, there was one thing that he most surely must have known: the baby she was carrying was not his.

Yet the man’s faith transcended his misgivings. He listened to the unseen and unknown messenger as he said: “Joseph...fear not to take unto thee Mary for your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost”.

The incredible truth is that he accepted that incredible announcement and went right to work on their unusual relationship. He adjusted to the situation at Nazareth, and this included the whole gamut of conflicts aroused by all kinds of nosy

neighbors in a small town. Oh how those Hebrews at Nazareth could talk!

Remember also that, according to the law, Joseph could have been accused of an illicit relationship that was punishable by death.

The wonder of it is that he stood by the woman he loved, became her husband and lived with her during those strange months of her pregnancy in loud-mouthed little Nazareth. What's more, he ministered to her needs on their tiresome and tedious pilgrimage from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census ordered at the hand of Caesar.

He did his very best to find comfortable quarters for her since he knew her time to deliver was soon. But when he failed there, he did the next best thing. He stayed by her side through the long night hours of her agony. Here was one father who did not wait impatiently outside the delivery room door.

Then, only days after the baby had been born, he led the mother and child to a distant land for safety. Not only Nazareth's wrath; but also Herod's wrath converged to make these months perilous and painful for the carpenter. None the less, in time, he guided his little family back to their home among the hills of Galilee. There he devotedly provided the manly gifts of husbandhood and fatherhood as only self giving love can afford. The love of God is mirrored in the heart of that rugged carpenter of Nazareth named Joseph. No wonder we wonder at the dimensions of such love between a man and a woman.

II. Look, also, at the blending, in the incredible story, of the love of a mother for her child.

God, who establishes all of earth's homes in families, cradled his own son in the arms of a very real, flesh and blood mother. Since that distant day, the family circle has been sacred.

No wonder we wonder at it all! Never has the unusual been so usual. Never has the unordinary been so ordinary. Never has a woman been placed in such a situation. But Mary accepted her position in life. It was bad enough to have had to carry a baby before marriage, but it was worse to birth that baby in a barn. Before her baby was born, she knew that somehow God was uniquely visiting this planet through her offspring. In some strange way, her first baby would be God's first baby too – "His only begotten Son".

Before her son was ten days old, other devout sons and daughters of Israel were adding to the confusion already caused by excited shepherds, bearing their story of an angel, and wise men from the East bearing their expensive gifts and saying that they had followed her baby's special star. And old Simeon and Anna at the temple told her that they could now die in peace because, in the face of her infant they had seen the hopes and fears of all the years. They correctly labeled him the Messiah. Put yourself in the place of a mother with that kind of action swirling around your first born.

By the time her son was twelve, he had already proved himself a match for the scholars and the Holy Men in Israel. Her son was scarcely thirty when he was insane in the eyes of some of his

countrymen and hardly thirty-one when judged a criminal by others. The citizens of Nazareth drove her son out of his home town and, from that day on, he never had a bed to call his own. Her son chose for himself twelve friends, but she stood by helpless while the tide of public opinion turned against him and one of his friends doubted him, another denied him and still another betrayed him to his enemies. After 36 months of ministering, she was there the day they nailed him between two thieves, suspended him between earth and sky and left him in the scorching sun to die.

But the greatest test of all, came three days later when her son broke open the armored grave and returned to her and to his followers. Scarcely a month passed before she watched her son ascend to God whose he had been all the while. Then a mother's joy blended with her agony into unmistakable conviction: no more than heaven lost him when he came to her, did she lose him when he returned to God.

After that, Mary stepped off stage, the lights dimmed and her part in the cosmic drama was done. We never see or hear from her again.

No wonder we wonder! When Christmas happened, love came to Bethlehem and it was cradled in the flesh and blood arms of a woman. Ever since that event, the hearth has been hallowed and Christmas has been a family day. "Home for Christmas" is on the lips of all earth's prodigal children as well as service personnel in Iraq.

Kate Douglas Wiggin said it best when she wrote:

*My heart is open wide tonight
For strangers, kith or kin,
I would not bar a single door
Where love might enter in.*

Coming to us through all the cracks of Christmas is love, human and divine. No wonder we wonder – at the love of a man for a woman; at the love of a mother for a child; and beyond all these, finally, at the love of God for His world.

Central to the meaning of Christmas is the love of God translated as it had never been translated before in the gift of His son.

Through earthquake, wind, and fire, he had spoken. Through prophet, priest, and king, he had spoken. Now, in His son, he stakes His ultimate claim on this planet and on us.

Christmas is our day. It is for us. We hear the beat of a distant drummer and we have our hopes on a shining star...no matter what.

No wonder we wonder at the strategy of God's great love! Look at the setting for it. It happened at Bethlehem, an off-the main road – town, astride a limestone ridge where, a long time ago, Jacob had gently laid to rest his beloved wife, Rachael; where Boaz had claimed Ruth to be his bride; and where the elderly prophet Samuel had placed oil on the young shepherd, David, and designated him to be Israel's King. But now, all the caravans bypassed Bethlehem on their way to Jerusalem where the markets were. Yet, this night, two bone-weary travelers entered the village and could scarcely be distinguished from those other hundreds who crowded into town for registration. After all, bureaucracy must always have more dollars to feed upon. And in this obscure village, a couple almost hidden by the events that

surrounded them, a child is born. And he comes to us and loves us at close range; in the rough and tumble of life where we are. No wonder we wonder!

John said it something like this: “The Word was made flesh and took up residence among us, and in that Word-in-residence is our life”.

Conclusion: No matter how you say it, it is the Christmas miracle, and it is even now hurdling toward you and your Bethlehem to be born.

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