

What Was Seen At Bethlehem

Luke 2:1-7

I wonder what I would have heard had I been there that night. It is a question that annually haunts me. Would I have heard the choirs of angels singing or simply the sounds of barnyard animals shifting around? Would I have seen the star in the sky that night or simply two poor and very frightened kids? Would, I have understood the hushed silence of the divine presence, or simply the chill of a cold east wind. Would I have understood the message of Emmanuel, God with us, or would the cosmic implications of that evening have passed me by?

I am convinced that had two people been there that night in Bethlehem it is quite possible that they could have heard and seen two entirely different scenes. I believe this because all of life is this way. God never presents Godself in revelation in a manner in which we are forced to believe. We are always left with an option, for that is God's way. Thus, one person can say "It's a miracle, while another says, "It's coincidence."

Certainly, very few people in Palestine saw and heard and understood what took place that night. The choirs of angels singing were drowned out by the haggling and trading going on in the Bethlehem bazaar. There was a bright star in the sky but the only ones apparently to pay any attention to it were pagan astrologers from the East. If anyone had seen Mary and Joseph on that most fateful night, they were too preoccupied with their own problems to offer any assistance.

In one of the All in the Family episodes that aired many years ago Edith and Archie are attending Edith's high school class reunion. Edith encounters an old classmate by the name of Buck who, unlike his earlier days, had now become excessively obese. Edith and Buck have a delightful conversation about old times and the things that they did together, but remarkably Edith doesn't seem to notice how extremely heavy Buck has become. Later, when Edith and Archie are talking, she says in her whiny voice "Archie, ain't Buck a beautiful person." Archie looks at her with a disgusted expression and says: "You're a pip, Edith. You know that. You and I look at the same guy and you see a beautiful person and I see a blimp. Edith gets a puzzled expression on her face and says something unknowingly profound, "Yeah, ain't it too bad."

You see, what we see and what we hear in life depends not upon events but rather on who we are as people. It's not what is out there but what is inside of us.

You may have seen again this year Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." There is one scene that has always fascinated me. Christmas Past has just paid a very discomfiting visit to Ebenezer Scrooge. Clearly the old miser is shaken by the entire ordeal. But when he wakes from his sleep, does he take the message to heart? No, he simply dismisses it by saying: "Bah, humbug! It wasn't real. Just a bit of last night's undigested beef." A vision to be taken to heart or simple indigestion? You tell me?

Oh, you say, had I been there at Bethlehem that night I would have seen. I would have understood. Would you? There is one way of knowing Ask yourself what you saw this Christmas Season. When you watched the news did you see chaos and strife, or did you see sheep without a Shepherd? When you went out to do your shopping, did you see only hordes of people in the stores, or did you notice the worried expressions on some of their faces? Worried because they are facing this Christmas without employment and they don't know how they are going to make ends meet.

And ask yourself what you heard this Christmas? Did you hear only the blasts of music and carols, or did you hear the silent sighs of the lonely and the bereaved who may be dreading Christmas because it accentuates their loneliness? And amid the sounds of honking horns and people arguing over parking places, did you hear the faint sound of laughter that will be coming from downtown because you furnished toys for poor children?

You see, so often what we see and what we hear is not dependent upon the event but upon ourselves. If you did in fact hear the cry from the lonely, the laughter of poor children, if you saw the sheep without a shepherd, then

you might just have seen the events that took place in Bethlehem that night. If you lacked that spiritual seeing and hearing, then you probably would have been with the 99% who were present, but who saw or heard nothing out of the ordinary.

In the end perhaps one of our carols words it best: No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin. Where meek souls shall receive him still, the dear Christ child enters in.