

What The Shepherds Saw

Luke 2:1-10

4th Sunday In Advent

19 December 2010

There was an interesting story in *The Globe and Mail* the other day about a rare find in Cornwall in England. In an old shed on the Enys family estate near Penryn in south western England, amidst a whole lot of junk discarded during renovations – old bathroom fixtures and the like – there was, lying unnoticed for decades, a birch-bark canoe.¹ The National Maritime Museum in Cornwall believes that the canoe is 250 years old and originally came from Canada, transported to Britain by a British army officer, Lt. John Enys, as a souvenir of his time fighting “against the rebellious American colonies during their war of independence in the 1770s and early 1780s.”²

The canoe, which is thought to have been built by yet unidentified First Nations peoples is being restored by the Cornwall Museum and then put on display in the spring. Next September, it will be shipped back to Canada – and in which city will it be put on display in this country? Well, of course, here in Peterborough at the Canadian Canoe Museum on Monaghan Road where it will become part of the permanent exhibition.

Now, this valuable part of Canadian canoe history might still be lying amidst all the scrap material and discarded fixtures in that Cornwall barn if it wasn't for a certain woman named Wendy Fowler, a descendant of Lt. Enys. Many people had looked in that shed over the long years and had seen that old canoe lying there. But, though seeing, they didn't see. Until Wendy came along. She was the one that did have eyes to see and recognised that canoe as not just being another piece of rubbish but as possibly a priceless artefact.

I wonder if you see things no-one else sees? If you are a mother, you will probably see a lost child in the mall quicker than anyone else. If you are an accountant, you will see the anomaly in the financial statement faster than the speed of light. If you are a soap opera fan you will instinctively suss out who is cheating on whom before the story-line has got that far. If you are a minister you will latch on to a good sermon illustration quicker than a speeding bullet.

The shepherds of Nativity times were like this. They noticed something no-one else saw – an angelic presence. A presence that did not register on anyone else's radar. But a presence of which they became aware while “watching over their flock by night”.³ As glorious as it was, as dramatic as it was, no-one else saw it. Bethlehem and everywhere around was jam-packed with returning travellers registering for taxation. Every hotel and inn, house and cottage, nook and cranny was crammed with copious crowds of huddled humanity. Yet only the

shepherds saw the angels. Only they had eyes to see.

Now, I'll bet you are saying to yourself, “I know where Rev. Turner is heading with this sermon. He is going to tell us that, like the shepherds of old, we today should also be seeing angels where no-one else sees them. But, then, he's a minister, he's got to say such things. Everybody knows angels only exist in the world of fantasy and imagination and in places like the Bible.” Or, do they?

Cynthia Thomas, a chaplain at St. Luke's Hospital in Houston, tells of the first Christmas she spent in that city. How lonely and unloved she felt away from home and family in that vast, anonymous metropolis. She even felt God had abandoned her. Until she dropped by the hospital chapel to watch some fellow employees tape their Christmas musical.

It was then that Cynthia saw a small, frail, middle-aged patient. She was totally “wrapped” in protective garb. A turban covered her bald head, the signature side-effect of her treatment. She wore a face-mask to protect her from germs. Her wheel chair was draped with sheets and blankets. “As the choir performed, this patient was singing Handel's *Messiah* with all her heart. Probably only her husband and God could hear her, but her spirit was soaring all over the room. While everything about her physical body whispered sickness and death, a love that transcends death poured from that frail frame. She sang with abandon, her pale, thin face luminous and eyes glittering. In the middle of this [worst] struggle of her life, the woman was praising God.”⁴ Cynthia felt so inspired by this sight. She felt her whole mood change. Suddenly she realised she had just been visited by the Angel of Christmas.

I think the Angel of Christmas visited me last Sunday afternoon. Just when I left the church, about an hour after the service, as I turned from Murray Street on to Water Street, I suddenly realised I had a flat tire. I pulled in to the city parking lot across the road and, amidst the wind and snow, set about jacking up the car to change the wheel. These small jacks, supplied with our cars, take a lot of winding and I was glad when I finally had the car raised to the right level. But just as I was about to take the offending wheel off, the jack slipped and the car bumped down, hitting my “winding” arm on the way. How, I wondered, was I going to find the strength to wind the car up again. My arm was tired and sore, and I was, by this time, freezing cold.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a car drew up and a young man jumped out. “I saw you when I was driving my girlfriend out to Trent to sit her exam. I thought I better

come back and see how you were getting on.” In no time, he had the car jacked up properly and the wheel changed – all with a wonderful smile. Thank you, Jordan! I don’t know who you are but you are an angel. My Christmas angel.

No, angels are not just restricted to biblical times. They are all around us. Waiting to transform our lives. I wonder if we might just come face to face with the Angel of Christmas when we least expect it. Have we eyes to see?

The shepherds not only saw the angels, they also saw the Christ-child. “wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”⁵ Everybody else seemed to miss Jesus, but not the shepherds. They were alert and watching. And they came and saw him in Bethlehem. And immediately they recognised him for who he was. God’s Son. The Messiah.

Isn’t it a pity every Christmas we see the Baby Jesus, but we don’t see him. He is hidden in plain sight. There, but not there.

In an interview with CBS this past week, renowned neurologist, Dr. Oliver Sacks, author of the best-selling book “Awakenings”, told how he suffers from a rare affliction called prosopagnosia or face-blindness. He cannot recognise other people’s faces as being different from each other. They all look alike. So many people say, “I can’t remember people’s names but I never forget a face.” Dr. Sacks says he can never remember a face, anyone’s face. “So sometimes I kiss or embrace strangers thinking that I know them.” He sees people, he says, but he doesn’t see them. He doesn’t see them for the unique, different, special people they are. It’s almost like they are hidden in plain sight.⁶

Isn’t that how it is with Jesus at Christmas? He’s there but he’s not there. He’s in full view. Everyone sees him but they don’t see him. They see him but not for who he really is. We see all the other stuff of Christmas so plainly. The gifts, parties, decorations, cards, lights and trees. But we don’t see Jesus. Sitting there in full view. Oh, may God give us the eyes to see the Boy of Bethlehem! And see him for who he really is!

Now, the shepherds certainly saw Jesus. But they didn’t just see and do nothing. They didn’t just watch impassively and say, “Oh, how very nice. Now, let’s get back to the real business of the day.” No, they saw and they did something. They responded. They reacted. “They made known abroad the things that had been told unto them.”⁷ They went out and did something about what they had seen. They were motivated to help others hear the Good News.

Rev. Dr. James Moore tells of a 12 year old boy called Matthew he knew in one of his congregations. He was the oldest in the family and had five younger sisters. One year, just before Christmas, Matt’s father suffered a heart attack and his mother went to pieces. Matt had eyes

to see and realised that his parents were not going to be able to organise any Christmas celebrations. His sisters were going to be so disappointed. So he went out on his own and, with money saved for a skateboard from his paper-round, he bought toys and trinkets for the girls. They had no red Santa stockings so he found five, long basketball socks and hung them up along with milk and cookies for Santa from the children. Matt even remembered to leave a note from Santa that said, “Thanks for the milk and cookies. Don’t forget to be good children for your Mom and Dad,” And, to show his impish sense of humour, added, “Remember, especially, be nicer to your big brother.”⁸

Like the shepherds, Matt not only saw, but he acted. Acted in the true spirit of Christmas. In the true Spirit of the Christ Child..

Let’s take a leaf out of this young man’s book and, this Christmas, let’s not only see with our eyes but be ready to act with our lives. To help other people. Those in need. In our community. In our family. In our church. To help with a random act of kindness. With a warm word of encouragement. With a generous gift.

And all to glorify him who was born in Bethlehem. Even Jesus Christ our Lord. To him be praise and glory. Amen.

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¹ Siri Agrell, “Historic Canadian birch-bark canoe found among junk in British shed”, *The Globe and Mail*, December 13, 2010,

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/ontario>

² Randy Boswell, “Historic birch bark canoe found in U.K. storage shed”, Postmedia News <http://www.canada.com>

³ Luke 2:8

⁴ James W. Moore, “Won’t You Let Him Into Your Christmas?”, *ChristianGlobe.com*,

⁵ Luke 2:12

⁶ Neil Katz, Prosopagnosia, “Oliver Sacks’ Battle with Face Blindness”, CBS HealthWatch, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504763_162-20014826-10391704.html

⁷ Luke 2:17

⁸ Moore, *op. Cit.*