

The Second Baptist Pulpit

"The Night Before Christmas"

Luke 2:8-20

December 17, 2006

Brent Beasley, Pastor

Second Baptist Church
4680 Walnut Grove Road
Memphis, Tennessee 38117
(901) 682-3395
www.2ndmemphis.org

"The Shepherd"

NIGHT WAS COMING ON, and it was cold, the shepherd said, and I was terribly hungry. I had finished all the bread I had in my sack, and my gut still ached for more. Then I noticed my friend, a shepherd like me, about to throw away a crust he didn't want. So I said, 'Throw the crust to me, friend!' and he did throw it to me, but it landed between us in the mud where the sheep had mucked it up.

But I grabbed it anyway and stuffed it, mud and all, into my

mouth. And as I was eating it, I suddenly saw -- myself. It was as if I was not only a man eating but a man watching the man eating. And I thought, 'This is who I am. I am a man who eats muddy bread.' And I thought, 'The bread is very good.' And I thought, 'Ah, and the mud is very good too.' So I opened my muddy man's mouth full of bread, and I yelled to my friends, 'By God, it's good, brothers!'

And they thought I was a terrible fool, but they saw what I

meant. We saw everything that night, everything. Everything!

Can I make you understand, I wonder? Have you ever had this happen to you? You have been working hard all day. You're dog-tired, bone tired. So you call it quits for a while. You slump down under a tree or against a rock or something and just sit there in a daze for half an hour or a million years, I don't know, and all this time your eyes are wide open looking straight ahead someplace but they're so tired and glassy they don't see a thing. Nothing.

You could be dead for all you notice. Then, little by little, you begin to come to, then your eyes begin to come to, and all of a sudden you find out you've been looking at something the whole time except it's only now you really see it-one of the ewe lambs maybe, with its foot caught under a rock, or the moon scorching a hole through the clouds. It was there all the time, and you were looking at it all the time, but you didn't see it till just now.

That's how it was this night, anyway. Like finally coming to-not things coming out of nowhere that had never been there before, but things just coming into focus that had been there always. And such things! The

air wasn't just emptiness any more. It was alive. Brightness everywhere, dipping and wheeling like a flock of birds. And what you always thought was silence stopped being silent and turned into the beating of wings, thousands and thousands of them.

Only not just wings, as you came to more, but voices-high, wild, like trumpets. The words I could never remember later, but something like what I'd yelled with my mouth full of bread. 'By God, it's good, brothers! The crust. The mud. Everything. Everything!'

Oh well. If you think we were out of our minds, you are right, of course. And do you know, it was just like being out of jail. I can see us still. The squint-eyed one who always complained of sore feet. The little sawed-off one who could outswear a Roman. The young one who blushed like a girl.

We all tore off across that muddy field like drunks at a fair, and drunk we were, crazy drunk, splashing through a sea of wings and moonlight and the silvery wool of the sheep. Was it night? Was it day? Did our feet touch the ground?

'Shh, shh, you'll wake up my guests,' said the Innkeeper we

met coming in the other direction with his arms full of wood. And when we got to the shed out back, one of the three foreigners who were there held a finger to his lips.

At the eye of the storm, you know, there's no wind-nothing moves-nothing breathes-even silence keeps silent. So hush now. Hush. There he is. You see him? You see him?

By Almighty God, brothers. Open your eyes. Listen.

Do you see him? Can you see him?

[Frederick Buechner, Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons, p. 13-15]

There are things that come along from time to time associated with Christianity that make you want to just go all the way back, 2,000 years, to that day when Jesus was born, and start all over—with a clean slate.

I thought about this this week when I read about the new “Christian” video game based on the Left Behind series of books. This game is called Left Behind: Eternal Forces. It is a supposedly Christian video game that promotes sectarian violence and religious war,

which is pretty much the opposite of what I would say the world needs right now.

In the game, players either convert or kill non-Christians. To be fair, you do lose “spirit points” after you kill someone, but if you stop and pray, you build your points back up. You get to choose at the start of the game whether you want to be on the Antichrist’s team or the righteous team.

The Antichrist’s team includes fictional rock stars and people with Muslim-sounding names.

The righteous include gospel singers, missionaries, healers and medics. You can be on the “good side” and try to convert or kill the non-believers, or you can join the side of the Antichrist. Convert them or kill them to win the holy war in which you are engaged.

Focus on the Family gives it a “thumbs up.” They say that the violence is ok because it is defensive in nature.

They must be referring to those many passages in the Gospels where Jesus differentiated between offensive and defensive violence. Remember that part where Jesus said, *If someone strikes you on the right cheek, go ahead and mow him down*

with a machine gun—because he hits you first.

Like the attic of a house you've lived in for 20 years, Christianity has accumulated too much junk over the years. I think we need to have a yard sale. Get rid of all the junk so we can see Jesus again.

Wouldn't it be nice to just go back to the beginning, back to that peaceful night when shepherds were watching over their flocks?

The angel of the Lord did appear before those shepherds. *And, Luke says, the glory of the Lord shone all around them. And then Luke says, And they were terrified.*

The angel said to the shepherds, *Don't be afraid; for see-- I'm bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*

And all of sudden there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God, and they were saying, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.*

Then the angels left the shepherds and went back into heaven.

What would you do now, if you were one of those shepherds? Try to put yourself in their place. You don't have a New Testament. You've never heard of Jesus. You're hoping for a messiah to come and be your king. The song "Away in a Manger" hadn't been written yet. You don't know there's "no crib for a bed." I wonder if you'd believe the story this angel told.

Here's what the shepherds did: they said to each other, *Let's go to Bethlehem and see just what's happened there.*

So they hurried over there and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger. The shepherds found Jesus--the son of God, Savior of the world, the Messiah, the Lord--lying in a manger.

And when they saw this, they told everybody about what had happened with the angel and all that. And told them what the angel had said about this baby being the savior, and everybody was amazed.

After the shepherds had seen Jesus, Luke says, *The shepherds went back to their flocks, glori-*

fying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.

Maybe that's why God told the shepherds first. He knew what their response would be.

It may be that the shepherds were the only ones who could have understood. The only ones who would accept it. It's like the story of the hair stylist who became a painter. When asked why she changed professions, she replied, *A canvas doesn't tell me how to make it beautiful.*

Night shift shepherds don't tell God how things are supposed to be done.

Max Lucado says in one of his books, *That's why the announcement went first to the shepherds. They didn't ask God if he was sure he knew what he was doing.*

Had the angel gone to the theologians, they would have first consulted their commentaries.

Had he gone to the elite, they would have looked around to see if anyone was watching.
Had he gone to the successful, they would have first looked at their Blackberries, cell phones, and calendars.

So he went to the shepherds. Men who didn't have a reputation to protect or an ax to grind or a ladder to climb.

Men who didn't know enough to tell God that angels don't sing to sheep and that messiahs aren't found wrapped in rags and sleeping in a feed trough.

[The Applause of Heaven, 72-3]

The shepherds may have been about the only people around there who could actually hear and believe the message that angel had to tell. The message that today in the city of David a savior, the messiah, the Lord has been born. And you will find him wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger.

No simple shepherds here. So what about you? What about me? Is there so much stuff piled up in the attics of our faith, that we can't even see the baby anymore? Can you find Jesus buried there underneath the by-products of our faith, the accoutrements of Christianity?

Once there was a little girl named Henrietta, Hety for short. She hated Christmas. There was too much noise, too much disorder, too much excitement.

She didn't like the Christmas tree lights which often didn't work, she didn't like the mess of Christmas wrappings all around

the floor, she didn't exactly like all the Christmas carols, or the snow and mud tramped into the house and, or the disappointment with the Christmas presents, even though she usually received all she had asked for or that her parents and brothers and sisters lost their tempers very quickly (Hety never lost her temper, well not very often anyhow.).

Why, she demanded, did Jesus have to be born at Christmas time. Couldn't he have chosen a day when everyone is more relaxed? Why did he not come a time when it was easy to pray and not a time when everyone was running around like crazy people.

But, her mother said, Hety, Christmas means Christ Mass, the Mass on Our Lord's birthday?

Oh, said Hety pondering this truth. Well, she said OK, but then why does Christmas have to be during the holidays.

Her mother admitted that it was a very good question.

[A story by Andrew Greeley]

Can you find the baby? Can you hear, above all the other noise, that a savior, the Messiah, the Lord, has been born? And

you will find him wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger.

Frederick Buechner told about a Christmas pageant a friend of his took part in once as the rector of an Episcopal church somewhere.

The manger was down in front at the chancel steps where it always is. Mary was there in a blue mantle and Joseph in a cotton beard. The wise men were there with a handful of shepherds, and of course in the midst of them all the Christ child was there, lying in the straw.

The nativity story was read aloud by the rector with carols sung at the appropriate places, and all went like clockwork until it came time for the arrival of the angels of the heavenly host as represented by the children of the congregation, who were robed in white and scattered throughout the pews with their parents.

At the right moment they were supposed to come forward and gather around the manger saying, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men*, and that is just what they did except there were so many of them that there was a fair amount of crowding and jockeying for position, with the result that one particular angel,

a girl about nine years old who was smaller than most of them, ended up so far out on the fringes of things that not even by craning her neck and standing on tiptoe could she see what was going on.

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will among men, they all sang on cue, and then in the momentary pause that followed, the small girl electrified the entire church by crying out in a voice shrill with irritation and frustration and enormous sadness at having her view blocked, *Let Jesus show!*

There was a lot of the service still to go, but Buechner's friend the rector said that one of the best things he ever did in his life was to end everything precisely there.

Let Jesus show! the child cried out, and while the congregation was still sitting in stunned silence, he pronounced the benediction, and everybody filed out of the church with those unforgettable words ringing in their ears.

And when we got to the shed out back, one of the three foreigners who were there held a finger to his lips.

At the eye of the storm, you know, there's no wind-nothing

moves- nothing breathes- even silence keeps silent.

So hush now. Hush. There he is. You see him? You see him?

By Almighty God, brothers. Open your eyes. Look.

Do you see him? Can you see him?

Second Baptist Church
4680 Walnut Grove Road
Memphis, TN 38117-2599