

## Sermon for Christmas Eve 2011

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In my Christmas Eve sermon last year, I made a rather geeky allusion to Star Trek, namely what Deep Space Nine could teach us about childbirth. In keeping with that nerdy theme this year, I was pondering a different episode of Star Trek recently, namely the pilot episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation. On its first mission, the new Enterprise is sent to investigate a strange starbase on the distant planet of Farpoint. While investigating the base, the ship's counselor, an empath named Deanna Troi, keeps sensing strong feelings of pain and fear.

As it turns out, the starbase was actually a sentient life-form whom the inhabitants of Farpoint had captured and forced to serve them. When the crew of the Enterprise finds out they free the creature, who ascends into space and meets its mate. When asked what she senses, Counselor Troi tearfully responds "Great joy... and gratitude, from both of them."

This transformation from fear to joy and gratitude is something we see powerfully in the Christmas story. The Shepherds seem to swing wildly from the one to the other at the tremendous news we heard again tonight: holy fear at the power of God, displayed by the heavenly host, and great joy and gratitude when they finally see the Christ Child. It is also something the believer experiences at this Great News. Like that alien creature in Star Trek, we were held captive to an external force: the power of sin and death, which we Christians believe is not merely a psychological phenomenon or sociocultural construct but is a real power which kept us as its prisoners. And, like that alien creature, a force infinitely greater than our captor - the power of love made manifest - freed us from pain and fear and enabled us once again to feel joy and gratitude.

It is natural, I think, to place ourselves in the role of the shepherds in this story, to identify most with them. Since scripture is not simply to be heard but to be lived, it *is* often profitable to think about where we see ourselves in the story. We can see pretty readily how we are the shepherds. We receive the Good News and it frees

us. We go off rejoicing. We, like the shepherds no doubt, can't keep it to ourselves. We tell our friends and our family members and even the stranger (I hope) what amazingly joyful a thing has taken place in Bethlehem and in our hearts, where the Saviour was just as truly born.

But what if we placed ourselves in the role of the Blessed Virgin for a minute instead? We are told that Mary "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." Now, I've been accused before of being ponderous (almost as much as I've been accused of being pedantic, which isn't surprising considering this particular sermon!). In our age of action and efficiency, accusing one of ponderousness is quite a slur. But perhaps a bit more quiet reflection and reverence is precisely what our age needs, particularly during this most hectic season.

The Blessed Virgin is in some way the memory of the Church, its inner sanctuary where the most intimate secrets of God's dealings with His people are pondered and treasured. Just as much as we, like the shepherds, ought to go off rejoicing and sharing the Good News, we ought also to keep this great and joyful News in our hearts and permit

it to slowly grow and change us.

Both are valid reactions to the reality that God is with us. Both must be held at once. There is a reason we sing both "Silent Night" and "Joy to the World" in the same liturgy. It is because we must be both Mary and the shepherds, both the quiet bearer of the Love which surpasses all understanding and the zealous sharer of the same.

And let us be grateful, not only for the fact that God Himself was born in a stable in Bethlehem, but that He continues to be born in the hearts of every man, woman, and child baptized in His glorious Triune Name. May we with joy and gratitude greet this Holy Child again and with reverence and awe approach Him as His Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity are made manifest again and we follow the directive of the psalmist, who said "Oh taste and see that the Lord is Good."

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