

Dec. 12, 2010

Third Sunday of Advent

Peace

Luke 2: 8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am 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 suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Finding a Place of Peace

I have a friend named Sheri. Sheri has a blog--- an on-line newsletter/journal----where she shares her experiences, insights, hopes, and prayer requests.

This past week she wrote about the noise of the Christmas season and how annoying she finds it when it's not just loud, but there are competing sounds.

She had gone to an outdoor Christmas program to hear her daughter playing in an orchestra and the people around her were talking so loudly and even shouting to each other that she couldn't focus on hearing the orchestra.

She also shared about waiting in the dentist office and said there was not only Christmas music playing, but the tv was also on.

And then she went to a Christmas party at church and there was Christmas music to sing to as they worked on crafts, but the teenagers at the next table kept talking loudly and beating on the table in rhythm with the music.

She was having a hard time finding that “peace on earth” that we have heard so much about.

I have noticed this, too. The other day I was in El Pollo Loco and there was music playing---two kinds of music at once---one in the dining room and another in the kitchen. It got so annoying that it was hard to carry on a conversation. The term “background music” became a nice wish. It certainly wasn’t in the background there!

When there are two competing songs, the music becomes the main event, pushing conversation into second place.

Everywhere you go there is music and noise--- tv, radios, iPods, cell phones, cars, people talking and shouting, sirens and horns, and all kinds of noise.

I keep hoping for a Silent Night, but it doesn't seem to happen. Instead the volume of life just seems to keep going up and up.

And I find myself looking for a place of peace, a place where I can hear my own thoughts and where I can talk to God.

This week as I read the passage from Luke, I started picturing those shepherds out in the fields, watching their sheep in the middle of the night.

I felt kind of envious of how quiet it must have been there, at night, when the sheep were sleeping and no tvs or cell phones for miles! The only sounds, in my imagination, were an occasional bleat from one of the sheep, a wolf howling somewhere at a distance, and the wind blowing through the bushes.

If I had been there, in that field, alone with my thoughts, on such a Silent Night, maybe I could've heard the still, small voice of God speaking to me.

And just when I got to that absolute silence in my imagination, I realized something!

Out of that quiet, out of that silent night when you could have heard a pin drop, suddenly an angel came, literally out of the clear blue night sky! Breaking the silence, startling the shepherds and maybe the sheep as well, that angel says, "Don't be afraid."

Well, **my** first reaction to that sudden interruption of my thoughts in that quiet night would have been:

“Hey! Thanks for giving me a heart attack! Don’t you know better than to interrupt me when I’m deep in thought?? Now, what was it you come to tell me?”

For me, the angel’s second words would have needed to be, “Calm down! I bring you news of great joy, but you have to settle down before I can tell you!”

The shepherds immediately forgot all about their sheep, looking at and listening to that angel. And then, as if one angel weren't enough noise on that night, the whole heavenly host appeared, singing in chorus, "Peace on earth, good will to all people whom God favors! Glory to God in the highest!"

More and more angels, more and more music... more noise.

On that Silent Night when the little town of Bethlehem was lying so still, out in the fields where the sheep slept and the shepherds stood quietly watching, suddenly there was a lot of noise----heavenly music, maybe, but still sound, still disruptive of routine, still grabbing attention away from what the shepherds had been doing.

And they left their sheep in the fields without, evidently, finding a sheep-sitter, without giving a second thought to those poor sheep wandering off and getting lost or attacked by wolves or lions.

The lives of the shepherds had been changed, at least for that night, and they left the solitude and quiet of watching their flocks by night and they went to find the baby that the angel had told them about.

Although those shepherds are never mentioned again in scripture, it seems inevitable that their lives were forever changed by this encounter with an angel and the heavenly host, followed by finding the holy baby in the manger.

It was not the *stillness* of the night that changed them. It was the noise, the music of the angels mixed with the sounds of the sheep and the other sounds of the night.

It was not the routine or the predictability or the calmness that changed their lives!

It was the unexpected, the noisy interruption of their private thoughts and routine that changed them!

It was not stillness, but loud voices! Voices that distracted and disrupted and terrified them, causing their hearts to pound.

Breaking the stillness in a way that would never be forgotten. Not by the shepherds. Not by the people who told the story over and over again until finally it was written down.

Not by any of us, even over 2000 years later.

The shepherds got up from their places in the field and went looking for a place of peace, where the baby was lying in a manger.

Peace is not the absence of noise. The shepherds knew about silence already. And then, here came the angels singing about “peace on earth!”

Peace---where? The Emperor Augustus ruled at that time during a period that was called the Pax Romana---a time of unchallenged Roman rule. Pax Romana means the Peace of Rome, but for the people of Israel, it was not a time of peace but of Roman occupation and oppression. Many people in Israel wanted to end the Roman rule and be self-governing again.

So they looked forward to a time when the Messiah would come and rescue them from their political rulers.

Instead Jesus came and showed them how to find peace in their own hearts, showed them how to have a deeper relationship with God

A relationship that would be a source of deep, inner peace.

A peace that was not just the absence of war

A peace that was not just quiet or calm

A peace that could be found even when it was noisy and distracting and chaotic.

Noisy and distracted and chaotic like those times my friend Sheri was writing about.

Even when we wish for a little peace and quiet, complaining of the noise, God is there. The excitement and the joy of the season contribute to the energy and the noise and the chaos.

And God is in the midst of all of it.

Because that is what Christmas is all about--- Emmanuel---God-with-us! No matter what is going on, God is there.

And if we consider our relationship with God as the most important part of our lives, we will have that peace that the angels sang about, no matter how noisy life gets.

My friend Sheri knows that. She was annoyed, yes, because most of the noise around her was created by people being rude and thoughtless and self-centered. It's all part of the energy of the season anyway. It's disruptive and it breaks into our deep thoughts. We get tired of the noise and we want to find a place of peace and quiet.

We want to find a silent night and we get drawn into the craziness of shopping and wrapping and cooking and baking. The noise envelops us and we have no chance of hearing the still, small voice of God. We give up hope of ever experiencing a “Silent Night” when even a baby Jesus doesn’t cry.

But we can still find that place of peace, a place where we are close to God’s heart.

A place of deep inner peace because we rest assured of God’s love for us, even when the world seems to whirl around us, even when it’s noisy and busy and rude and thoughtless.

Sheri knows that place of peace. She had just lost it for a few days. Sheri has had her share of struggles and suffering and she has found ways to rely on her faith even in far worse times than a week of constant noise.

So my prayer for her, and my prayer for you, is this---

May you find that place of peace next to the manger, in the presence of the holy child of Bethlehem, surrounded by the love of God. May you know that the noise you hear is the sound of angels singing, of shepherds rejoicing, and of Mary and Joseph singing a lullaby, all at the same time!

And may the peace that you find bring you great joy, for we are celebrating the birth of Christ the Lord, the gift of God's unfailing grace!

Amen.