

## INI

Luke 2,1-20

Christmas 2016 — 24-25 December 2016

**Greeting:** To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Christmas Gospel According to Saint Luke, which was read earlier:

And the Angel said unto the shepherds, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.<sup>11</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.<sup>12</sup> And this shall be a sign unto you; you shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”

**So far the reading. Let us pray:** Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

**Introduction:** When I was growing up, I remember my mother addressing and signing what to me were hundreds of Christmas cards (I guess in our household, that was woman’s work). She had the cards divided into three piles—Christians, Jews, and I-Don’t-Know. For the Christian pile, the greeting was “Merry Christmas” and Jewish pile it was “Happy Hanukkah,” and for all others it was “Seasons Greetings.” The Christmas cards which we sent out, as well as the ones we received, had a specifically religious picture. More often than not, it was a manger scene.

The manger scene that was depicted then—as it is now—the holy family—Joseph, Mary, and, of course, the baby Jesus. Surrounding

them were a variety of individuals and animals—wise men, shepherds, sheep, donkeys, maybe a cow, perhaps some angels floating in the air somewhere, perhaps a guiding star, you name it. Invariably, there were halos around the heads of Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus.

Halos, of course, represent holiness. If you see a halo around a person in a picture, you know that person is “special.” In Christian art, Jesus and the saints are invariably represented as having halos. As a matter of fact, if one wants to get into this matter of halos, there are even different kinds of halos which represent different theological emphases.

But the point here is that the traditional artistic depictions of the nativity are somewhat surreal, what with these three people having a luminescence issuing from their heads. What would you think if you came across a person on the streets of Hayward or Stockton, and that person had radiant beams of light coming from his or her head? What words or images come to mind? One word might be “awesome!” But more probably another word might be “weird,” or perhaps, “freaky.” Regardless of what adjective you might want to use, ask yourself a question: would this person draw you closer or would you want to keep your distance? If it were me, I suspect that I’d want to keep my distance.

But contrast this image of the holy family with the image that traditional art has of angels. Here luminescence is entirely in order. Brightness is the order of the day. Lots of light. Maybe not a halo, but lots and lots of light surround these beings. They are usually depicted in long flowing robes. But if a person were to see these heavenly beings, one would definitely want to keep one’s distance.

But thank God that when He came to us, when He took on our flesh, when He became incarnate, we do not find any Halo In The Manger. Thus we shall look at this theme: “**No Halo in the Manger.**” I’ll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Glory And Fear**
- 2) Diapers And Normalcy; and,**
- 3) Sharing His Humility**

**1) Glory And Fear.** From Luke's Gospel, we see that God sent angels to tell shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem that Good News in the flesh was awaiting them in David's city.

Today we are surrounded by angels. Not the heavenly variety, although that may be the case, but more often than not the angels that are the products of television and the new age angel industry. There are shops dedicated to angels. There are newspaper articles on angels.

These "manufactured" angels are appealing and helpful. They are available to virtually anyone regardless of race or creed, or in the instance of the new age, lack of any discernable creed. They are available to Christians, non-Christians, and un-believers. They are seemingly at our beck and call.

In Luke's Gospel, however, the angels are not at anyone's beck and call. But this angel, and later the heavenly army that surround him, had come directly from the throne of God. These are God's warriors, not sanitized new age angels.

The shepherd's reaction to seeing an angel give us a pretty good idea of what kind of image they had. They were flat-out terrified. They were filled with fear.

This was not the fear of seeing what was truly strange. This was the fear that is awakened in the heart of total unworthiness.

Isaiah 6 gives us a vision of Isaiah seeing God surrounded by the seraphim, and saying:

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

In Exodus 34, Moses sees God passing by. What was there? Glory. Light. And yet God tells Moses that Moses shall only see the back of God. If Moses saw God face-to-face Moses would surely die.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai his face glowed with the reflected glory of God’s Holiness. But when Aaron and the rest of the Israelites saw Moses they were afraid. And Moses veiled his face. Even telling them not to be afraid was insufficient. The veil appeared to be necessary.

Glory reflecting the glory of God.

Glory reflects holiness. God dwells in light inaccessible.

In a word: no sin.

This light reminds us of in Whose presence we dare not presume to stand. God is holy. We are not.

But in Bethlehem at the first Christmas we have

**2) Diapers And Normalcy.** Now we know in our heart of hearts, that when Mary and Joseph were with the baby Jesus in Bethlehem, they did not have halos.

They were, in the words of today, severely normal people. No description of them would make us think otherwise.

Humiliation. Poor circumstances. Sentimentality.

But what is true Humiliation. True humiliation is Jesus hiding His glory. Jesus is God in the flesh, but veiling His glory. As Paul writes to Philippians:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a Cross (Philippians 2,5-9)

When we made confession of our faith, this humiliation is confessed in the words that Jesus was

...conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

As Isaiah prophesied, Jesus was a man afflicted with sorrow — the sorrow of our sins. God was veiling His glory. Jesus was veiling His glory. So behind the crib stands the Cross.

This is Good News of which the angel speaks.

We can get close to Jesus without being afraid.

This is Jesus' invitation. His humanity.

**3) Sharing His Humility.** Today, if we can hear it, the angels would also tell us not to be afraid. To approach the manger and gaze at the face of our God. What do we see?

We do not see a glow of a halo, we do not see the brilliance of the angels reflecting the holy glory of God, but we see only the face of

Jesus, the face of the babe of Bethlehem. This is the face of inviting forgiveness. So what does all this mean for us?

In his book, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, Jaroslav Pelikan comments on a sentimental approach to the Baby Jesus and to Luther's reaction. We hear:

To hearers who cooed sentimentally over the infant Jesus and clucked over his poverty, "If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby!" Luther retorted: "Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor."

We dare not over sentimentalize Jesus' birth. We think of the details. "No room in the inn." "Laid in a feeding trough." Surrounded by animals. Straw. Animal smells.

An account in the paper looked at Jesus' apparent "homelessness" and exhorted us to look at the homeless. A bit of guilt. Perhaps at our good fortune? Guilt may provide a quick fix. Christmas charities abound and in difficult economic times the news reports that they are having a tough time raising enough money to meet all their needs. But these needs that are being met are for one day. What about the other 364 days in the year?

Where do we first find the face of Jesus? Look in the mirror. Then look at our neighbor! Our spouse. Our parents. Our children.

It's true that at times it is difficult to get close. It isn't because of the glory of God, but because of the sin we see. Perhaps we see it in ourselves. Perhaps we see it in our neighbor. But when we see sin, we should also see the face of Jesus. The face that invites us to forgive even as we have been forgiven.

This is the meaning of Christmas. Love. Love of God for us in Christ. This is the forgiveness that works 365 days a year—or at least it should. This is tough. This is the love that forgives, and it forgives in the good times as well as the bad.

**Conclusion.** God’s glory is manifested in two ways. We can see the brightness of angels which reflect the glory of God. The reaction is invariably one of fear. That is why the angels have to say, “Fear Not.”

But the glory of God is also revealed in another, more inviting way. It is the glory of Christ, who veiled His Godhead so that we might not be afraid.

That Jesus led a life of humiliation is much, much more than having been born in poor circumstances. This humiliation was an act of love. He veiled the glory of God. This is more than Superman going into a phone booth and emerging as Clark Kent, mild mannered reporter. This is a conscious decision that God would get close to us. That He would be pleased to dwell with us. That He would be pleased to go to the Cross and die for us. That He would be pleased to forgive us.

And being forgiven we might live with Him and for Him. We are not afraid to come to the foot of the feeding trough, nor are we afraid to come to the foot of the Cross.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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