

“Response Time”

“Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”

Many of the turning points in the biblical narrative depended on how people responded to the call of the Lord:

- When the Lord called Abram to “*go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you*” (Genesis 12:1), the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise was dependent on how Abram would respond. When it is reported that “*Abram went, as the LORD had told him*” (12:4), the covenant promise that “*I will make of you a great nation ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” (12:2-3) began to be fulfilled.
- When the Lord spoke to Moses through the burning bush at Mt. Sinai, God invited him to “*come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt*” (Exodus 3:10). At first, Moses is reluctant to do what the Lord put before him; but after a lengthy conversation between the Lord and Moses, “*Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt, and Moses carried the staff of God in his hand*” (4:20). Because of his faithful response, Moses becomes the one through whom God liberates the enslaved Israelites and leads them out of bondage back to the land of promise.
- When Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord saying, “*whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*” Isaiah responds without hesitation, “*Here am I, send me!*” (Isaiah 6:8). Through this faithful response, Isaiah becomes the great prophet of the Lord whose word we hear throughout Advent and Christmas, bringing us the good news that “*a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*” (9:6).
- In Nazareth, a young woman is planning her wedding and looking forward to raising a family among her family and neighbours when an angel named

Gabriel appears before her and offers “*greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.*” (Luke 1:28). The angel then announces that Mary will give birth to a son named Jesus, who “*will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David*” (1:32). When Mary asks the angel “*how can this be, since I am a virgin,*” Gabriel reveals to her that “*the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.*” (1:34-35). But because God never compels anyone to do the Will of the Lord against their will, all depends on Mary’s response. When she responds, “*here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word,*” Mary becomes the mother of the child born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger, the child through whose birth “*the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*”

- As Mary is giving birth to her firstborn son in Bethlehem, “*in that region there were shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night*” (Luke 2:8). While the image of the shepherd was commonly used in the Bible to describe both kings and the Lord (including the famous words from Psalm 23: “*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want*”) at the time of Jesus’ birth shepherding was a despised profession. Shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who often grazed their flocks on other people’s lands and could not be relied upon to faithfully tend the sheep placed in their care. For shepherds who defied this stereotype by being faithful and honest, shepherding was arduous work that required them to be away from home to keep watch over their flocks on cold, dark nights. But it is to these lowly shepherds – not to kings, emperors, or the elite of society – that the announcement of Jesus’ birth is made when “*an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*” (2:9). While it was customary in the Roman Empire for poets and orators to declare peace and prosperity at the birth of a future emperor, this announcement comes from an angel who announces the birth of a child who will be the fulfillment of the Word of the Lord: “*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 Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*” (2:10-11). The announcement to the shepherds fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that the Lord has “*sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners*” (Isaiah 61:1). The angel then issues an implicit command for the shepherds to go to Bethlehem where they will find a child, proclaiming to them that “*this will be a sign for you: you will*

find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger” (2:12). Before the shepherds can react to this announcement, “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 favours!’” (2:13-14).

- “The first witnesses of the great event are watchful shepherds ... they are among the poor, the simple souls whom Jesus would bless, because to them above all is granted access to the mystery of God. They represent the poor of Israel, the poor in general: God’s first love.” – Pope Benedict XVI

The shepherds are the first to hear the good news of the birth of Jesus the Messiah in Bethlehem; but as is true so often in the Bible, sharing this Christmas Gospel with others depends on their faithful response, whether they will indeed “*come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing; come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the newborn king*” (ELW Hymn 289). As the faithful response of others made the fulfillment of God’s Will possible, the shepherds respond to the angelic pronouncement and call by saying 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*” (2:15). Luke describes the response of the shepherds in three stages:

1. Their conversation with one another and their decision to leave their flocks to search for the child.
2. Their following the instructions of the angel as they went with haste and “*found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in a manger*” (2:16).
3. They report to the Holy Family and others in the stable what they had experienced: “*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*” (2:17-18).

Throughout this narrative, the emphasis falls on the confirmation of the things that had been spoken to them, the angelic announcement that the child born of Mary is the Messiah. The words of the prophet Isaiah had been fulfilled; the Lord, the Saviour of God’s people, has been born.

- “The child in the manger is a sign to the shepherds that they had found the child of whom the angel had spoken. The manger, therefore, is mentioned in each part of Luke’s birth story.” – Alan Culpepper.

The proclamation of the shepherds continues as they “*returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them*” (2:20). The faithful witness of the shepherds continues even after they leave the manger, the beginning of the witness of generations of Christians who celebrate the birth of our Saviour in Bethlehem and then go forth and “*tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere ... that Jesus Christ is born*” (ELW Hymn 290).

- “Neither did the angels find princes or the mighty but only untaught and lowly folk. Might they not have brought their message to the high priest, the scholars at Jerusalem who have so much to tell about God and the angels? No, not they, but the poor shepherds were found worthy of such great grace and honour from heaven, they, who on earth have no honour. Yes, truly, God casts out all that is lofty.” – Martin Luther, Sermon for Christmas 1522.

It is because of the faithful responses of generations of God’s people that God’s Word was proclaimed and God’s Will has been accomplished. It was due to the faithful response of Mary that she becomes the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ; it was due to the faithfulness of Joseph that “*he took Mary as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus*” (Matthew 1:24-25). It is through the obedience of the shepherds that the good news proclaimed to them by the angels is shared with others, so that all may hear the angelic announcement that “*to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*” As this glorious message is the good news we celebrate at Christmas, may it be the good news we share with others so that all may know that the child born in Bethlehem and laid in the manger is God’s gift of great joy for all God’s people.

- “And so the shepherds go to the city of David. The shepherds and the scene are described with some of Luke’s favourite words, words he has used before: wondering, pondering in the heart, making known the revelation, praising and glorifying God. The stable is bare, but the glory of God floods the story.” – Fred Craddock.

Thanks to the faithful response of Mary, Joseph, and the Shepherds, we are able to celebrate the good news that to us is born this day our Lord and Saviour, the fulfillment of God’s promises, the child who is God’s promise of *Emmanuel*, that God is with us always. May we give thanks for the faithful response of those who make our celebration of Christmas possible, and may we endeavour in our time to respond

faithfully to God's call to share the light of this holy day with others, so that all may know that "*unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.*"

Amen.