

Christmas 2016

Christmas has finally arrived. There's been so much anticipation, so much hype, that it's hard for one day to bear the weight of all the expectations. That's pretty obvious as (tomorrow) we look at gifts scattered around the living room and wrapping paper on its way out. Great expectations have always had a lot to do with this feast, but they are great expectations that have gone through significant revisions along the way.

We know that the expectation of a Messiah had a very long history. The oppressed people of God yearned for the savior God would send them. Their hopes were recorded in their history and the writings of the prophets. Like ourselves, they turned to God's word for hope and, like us, they brought their own images to their reading of the Scriptures. They read God's word in the light of their own mindset and created their own images of the savior God would send.

They suffered a great deal before the time they would be raised up and all the world would see that they were God's own people.

Each of our readings today are really all about God's greatest response to human hopes. God sent a savior who was neither king nor warrior. One of the clearest signs that God is active in our world or in our lives is that something extraordinarily good is happening and it's not at all how we anticipated it would

be. No matter how much we learn from the Scriptures, God surprises us by working from a script we don't always expect.

Of all of the different readings for the Christmas liturgies, St. Luke gives us the best stories from which to build our nativity sets. All he's missing are the Wise Men.

And since the shepherds play such a key role in Luke's story it's worth seeing how they give us a unique perspective on the Nativity. And we can start with the fact that Shepherds were among the least respected people of their day.

A shepherd's job description demanded little more than someone who could stay awake most of the time, stop strays, and effectively aim a slingshot at dangerous creatures.

Tied to a career that offered no Sabbath breaks, they couldn't observe the letter of Mosaic Law and would hardly have been among those who could have read it anyway.

By reputation they weren't overly committed to honesty and would have always appeared on the scene smelling pretty bad.

All in all, they were about as different from the religious elites as anyone could be.

So when it came to waiting for a savior they lacked a theological checklist by which to judge anyone claiming to be the Messiah. We are told that angels appeared to them, but the angels only awakened the shepherds' curiosity.

Not that a sky full of angels would have been a normal experience, but that's not what convinced them.

Following the angel's instructions, they went to Bethlehem looking for "a savior," the "Messiah and Lord." When they arrived, they gazed upon a newborn wrapped up like every other infant, with the singular distinction that this one was lying in a manger – just like the angel said he would be.

The shepherds were the absolute opposite of cynics. Having heard that God was coming to them as a child born in the poorest circumstances imaginable, they wanted to see this for themselves.

We don't know exactly what they believed. CNN wasn't there to ask them questions.

In any event, they never could have answered the questions necessary to receive confirmation, but they shamelessly, and quite courageously told others what they had seen and heard. Uneducated and inarticulate as they must have been, God chose them to be the very first evangelists.

In the end we'll never know exactly what so impressed the shepherds when they encountered Jesus lying in a manger.

It may have been the fulfillment of the angel's or the prophets' promise of a child to be born. It may have been something they perceived in the presence of the child.

Perhaps Mary and Joseph's love for God was so tangible that they evangelized the shepherds by simply being in their presence. Whatever it was, the shepherds were open and humble enough to be changed by it.

As we find joy in this celebration of Christmas, let us return with those shepherds to Bethlehem and allow ourselves to be changed by the presence of the Lord entering our lives as we journey together through this joyous season enjoying the full and timeless presence of God.