

## The Light and the Multitude

(Luke 2:1-20)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2019

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

Over the course of several Thursday evenings last month, I drove from Clarke County to the seminary in Alexandria from which I graduated in order to attend series of lectures on the Stations of the Cross. For those who may be unfamiliar, this is a type of service in which attendees move between a series of point, or stations, reading passages of scripture and sharing prayers while reflecting on images of 14 different scenes of Jesus' journey from his condemnation to the cross.

The two class instructors, one a professor of theology and the other an artist, led us through discussions on ways of praying and preaching the Stations, using their recently-published book on the subject as a guide. We also shared in opportunities to view and discuss some wonderful contemporary works of art portraying different scenes from the Old and New Testaments.

One image we viewed was a painting of the visitation to the shepherds, the narrative of which we just heard in the passage from Luke's Gospel. It was created by the American artist Henry Tanner in about 1910, and it struck me in a particularly deep way because of the manner in which Tanner illuminated the shepherds. As you look at the painting, you see a dark sky and dark landscape, and among the gathering of shepherds only the faintest of glows from a campfire. Yet in the depths of the darkness, the shepherds themselves are reflecting a brilliant white light that is coming from somewhere from beyond the borders of the painting ... from even farther away than the forms of the angels appearing at the edge of the scene.

Knowing that this particular reading was coming up, and with the Tanner painting still fresh in my mind, I spent some time over the past few days looking at ways in which other artists portrayed this scene. I looked at versions by the Italian artist Vecchio, the Dutch artist Flinck and the Portuguese artist Luini. I scrolled through numerous images of icons and modern drawings. A few weeks ago, my family and I even had the opportunity to see in person an etching of the shepherds and angels created by Rembrandt and currently on display at the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley in Winchester.

With each new image, the first thing to which I was drawn was **the light**. In some, the angels themselves were the most brilliantly lit of the figures. In others, it was the shepherds bathed in the light. But without exception, each one I found shared a single, powerful trait: **light breaking through the darkness**.

On that first Christmas night more than 2,000 years ago, the world was dark. There was a land suffering under Roman oppression ... a kingdom governed by a cruel puppet ruler ... a people who in the heaviness of their lives cried out for the arrival of the promised messiah. Israel, the nation and its people, was living **in that darkness**. It was into that darkness ... that **void** ... that the light of the infant Jesus burst forth. It would be several years before the entire world would know of the true power and significance of what had happened. But on that night, in the darkened fields just a few short miles away from the newborn child, the shepherds standing watch over their flocks **would know**.

At the very beginning of the life of the one who would bring incredible gifts to many through his healing, teaching, preaching and praying, it was **these shepherds** who received one of the **first** gifts. It was the gift of **knowledge** ... knowledge that something wonderful had happened. It was the gift of **awareness** ... awareness that a Savior had entered the world. It was the gift of **light** ... light in a world of darkness. Perhaps most remarkably, it wasn't a gift received from a single source; it was a gift presented by a multitude of the heavenly host.

Now you may be wondering, "How many are in a multitude?" Well, consider that the full measure of the "heavenly host is beyond counting; the many who appear here do not exhaust it."<sup>1</sup> Whether it is the number of angels portrayed in the paintings I looked at or the number of angels that may come to mind when you consider that scene, neither amount is anywhere **close** to the number in the sky that night. For any total we might come up with, there will be more ... **far more**. The sky would have been filled ... filled with a blinding light and with an almost deafening exclamation, "Glory to God in the highest heaven."

Now all these years later, in the darkness of **this** evening, the light of God again bursts forth. Like the shepherds in the fields that first Christmas night, **we** are the recipients of that **good news** ... the news that something **wonderful** has happened ... the news that a **Savior** has entered the world. Today, though, something for us can change: now, as ones who have received that news, **we** can be the **multitude**. **We** can now be the ones sent by God to share "good news of great joy for all the people." **We** can be the ones, as with the heavenly host, to bring the light of God into the world ... to be like the angels of Rembrandt, or Vecchio or Tanner reflecting the light of the Father and illuminating the land.

As we leave this place and go out in the world, rejoicing in the power of the God who created us, the Son who redeems us and the Spirit who sustains us, may **we** be the ones proclaiming with a deafening voice and a brilliant light: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown. *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 403.