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12/24/87

THE LOVELIEST NIGHT OF THE YEAR  
December 24, 1987  
Christmas Eve

Pretend for a minute that instead of warm and sunny Fort Lauderdale (We don't usually know how lucky we are), you were over in Israel, out in the shepherd's fields of Bethlehem tonight. I mean this very night, tonight. What a time it would be tonight! We often do not realize how nice we have it, with all of our complaints.

But over to Bethlehem: I suppose nothing is more incongruous than the sounds of gunshot and harsh screaming voices of soldiers and protesters at battle. The orders from the Defense Minister himself are to shoot to hit, not warning shots to scare away. Shoot to kill! If you were in Bethlehem tonight, all that you would hear is fear and gunfire. The only light in the sky which you would see, no doubt would be the blazing lights of the firebombs being hurled about, as gangs of protesters trashed the stores on Manger Square. "Bethlehem", the Sun-Sentinel wrote on this Christmas Eve morning, "is heavily armed with troops patrolling the streets in the city of Christ's birth." Oh, dearie me, it is so sad.

Soldiers outnumber the handful of tourists, the article continued. Visitors are so cautious about the traditional gathering in Bethlehem to behold Christ's

birth, and the service over in Shepherd's Field is in great jeopardy tonight. Mayor Elias Friej said bleakly: "This will be a joyless Christmas." It has been a horrid couple of weeks of Palestinian protests and the harsh Israeli response.

My concern tonight, however, is not political, neither is it here to condemn one side or the other. I can sympathize with the Palestinians who, since 1948, have been dispossessed of land that once was theirs to roam about in freedom. I can catch their envy and their anger when the modern conveniences and high technology of the State of Israel came to trample their quiet, simple rural life. They largely live in camps and tents out on the barren hill, and are disenfranchised, to be sure.

But I also can sense the impatience of the Jewish people there, whose single goal, I can tell you personally, is to bring their children home again, to end this endless barrage of sticks and stones and bombs and guns. For forty years every 18 year old son and daughter has been drafted from their normal lives to serve the military. I suppose it is true to say that the Israelis in this present case have overreacted, but were I the Defense Minister, I don't know what I would do. I can understand the weariness and constant fear of that tiny and ambitious nation.

But I have another purpose here than to propose solutions to the long struggle in the Middle East. I am here to bring a fresh reminder of another night two thousand years ago, where there were some other sounds to hear in and around Bethlehem: the sound of Angels singing, the sound of a baby's sweet voice; the sound of a young mother, so highly favored, rejoicing that her child was finally born; the sounds of shepherds so awed by the heavenly intrusion of the Angels, that they did not know what to do. "They were sore afraid", the King James Bible said, until that precious angel said: "Fear not, for tonight I bring you glad tidings of a great joy, which shall be to all the people, for unto you is born this day, a Saviour who will bring peace to all the world."

I call it the loveliest night of the year...back then, and now...

The loveliest night of the year

(1) Because it is the way God wants the world to be. This is God's way. It's just like Him to do it this way, we do it as we choose. We adore power, honors, success, money...

God adores small towns and quiet things...  
we get so rushed and busy with influential  
positions and people

God loves little babies - inspires - and

small children. It's just like God to do  
it this way.

Fantastic additions:

Angels

Stars in the sky

Great stories

Loveliest night because it is God's way to  
touch the simple things (?).

(2) Then, it is the loveliest night of the  
year, because the love of God came down on Christmas.

That is what is happening on Christmas Eve.

Don't make it any more complicated than you  
have.

It is not a debate

It is a witness, a story.

Love in God comes through the barrier.

Joseph Campbell - A tiny speck of a hole between  
the natural and supernatural.

In primitive religions, people always feared  
the gods. When thunder shook the sky, and lightning cracked

its mighty fear into the breast of everyone around, that was their God. Gods were angry, capricious, non-caring powers who hurled their might at any displeasure. The Greek Pantheon and the Roman Gods on Mount Olympos played their heavenly games, but men at most were pawns -- human life was cheap and meaningless to them. Even the Old Testament God was too often filled with vengeance and His anger drove his mightiest servants to shameful degradation.

That feeling lingers on in far too many even now, here and now, today, of an angry God who is subtly and surely out to get you, even if you do watch out.

But not so, come the Eve of Christmas...

Writer Vajra Kilgour

The Story of a Trip to Tibet -- learned later of more riots, killings, arrests, all God's children got troubles. They have prayer wheels in Tibet, prayers printed on scraps of paper, placed in a huge wheel and spun off. She told of a trip up the highest pass, where they say endless branches stuck in the now, covered with prayers printed on little flags. They are carried to the point on earth nearest to heaven, and hung loosely on the branch, in hopes that a gust of wind will carry the prayer skyward in further hope that the prayers will be answered.

Pagan? Sure. Unlikely to succeed? Sure. But...the flags seemed to represent something indomitable in the human spirit: "The Eternal Life of Hope."

It's the loveliest night of the year, because added to the hopes of all the peoples of the world is the hope we have in Christ. He came down. We do not have to wait out on a windy hill in hopes that the gusts of wind might carry our prayers heavenward. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in him tonight.

III. Then, finally, it is the loveliest night of the year, because it encourages each of us to choose in favor of the love of God come down in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Madaren

Why should there be a miraculous vision at all, and why to these shepherds? It seems to have had no effect on them at all. Their story was either untold, or not listened to for over 30 years. No shepherds who had witnessed the angels in the night sky ever came to worship, or even follow Jesus. The Angel Visitation was apparently utterly forgotten, until Luke began his systematic search for a full and accurate record of Jesus of Nazareth.

I wonder why those shepherds disappeared, or at least why their desire to tell their story ceased in all too short a time. I wonder what happened to them?... Could such an event have passed from their memory and left no ripple in their lives? Hardly.

As far as we know, Jesus never went back to Bethlehem, the city of his birth. Just five miles away, and he never ambled down to visit, not that is recorded anyway. I rather thing he probably did, for nostalgic reasons anyway.

And the wise men too. They also disappeared back into their search for wisdom.

So you're too busy...too much else like the  
inn-keeper

Two hippies years ago in California, passing  
a manger scene and decorated greetings on the front lawn.

Oh, look at the clunch trying to horn in on  
Christmas

Or worse yet, you already did it....

CONCLUSION

Morey Callahan