

# Preparing the Soul

## *Advent Discoveries:*

Luke 2:8-16, Galatians 4:4-7

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Does anyone here suffer from CSSD, Christmas Seasonal Stress Disorder? I'm feeling some stress. I haven't finished shopping (my usual pattern) and I must complete that job while shouldering some extra responsibilities in preparing for Christmas at work and home. This past week I also had the tantalizing invitation to write a short column for the local newspaper. I didn't bite, but I had a few tentative titles should I free up some time. Here is one: *Christian by Choice, Atheist by Default*. Here is another: *Believing, But Missing God*. Both titles describe the same challenge. They explain my stress. Yes, I could be better organized and use my time more wisely, but couldn't we all? Who fills every minute with purposeful activity and then rests the exact amount necessary? I'm convinced that there is something more profound behind my stress than procrastination although that certainly adds to it. I'm stressed when I think I'm alone in my responsibilities, when I choose to believe that Jesus is the reason for the season, but act like Jesus isn't around for the season. When I act like Jesus has abandoned me, like God has nothing to do with my situation, I behave like an atheist... and I'm stressed.

The other day I was delayed for a meeting by a family concern. I did not recognize God's involvement. Then later I got stuck behind an abandoned car at an intersection. I did not ponder how God was involved. I received interrupting phone calls. My anxiety level rose, not my joy. I did not accept the calls as gifts and part of God's agenda for my day. Without

reflection, I was thinking, feeling and acting like God had nothing to do with my situation. I was behaving like an atheist who acts as if there is no God involved in our world.

I think all of us are impressed by the visitation of angels to Mary, Joseph and the shepherds. We can see why they were affected. We think we'd be affected too. The Magi from the East confuses us somewhat. We don't associate stars and movement in the night sky with births. We undoubtedly would have missed what brought them to Jesus. However, most of Bethlehem did not have the experience with the angels, and they did not understand the stars. Their only link to Jesus was the testimony of shepherds. Listen to the Scripture:

***When (the shepherds) had seen (baby Jesus), they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.*** (Luke 2:17-18, NIV)

Notice, the word *amazed*. Luke didn't write the word *believed*. He did not write that they believed and worshiped Jesus too. Indeed, in contrast to the people's response to the shepherds, the Bible says, ***“but Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.”***

Suppose you met three of these shepherds for the first time. One said: “Hi, I'm Larry, this is my brother Darryl, and this is my other brother Darryl.” You might have difficulty believing them. Every weakness, or every perceived weakness, could hinder you from believing their message. One definition of an expert is *a person who knows a lot about a subject and lives in a distant city*. When the adult Jesus was rejected by his hometown and his own family, he said:

***Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.***  
(Matthew 13:57, NIV)

Jesus was rejected because his hometown people focused on his humanity, his commonality rather than the love of God. We are too familiar with people's frailties to recognize the presence of God at work in them. Your own attitude toward the shepherds that God sends you and also your attitude about the nature of life may prevent you from seeing God in your midst.

I remember the story of a missionary trying to explain to a tribal chief in some equatorial country the concept of snow and ice. When the missionary said that people walk on a lake to fish in the winter, it was too much. The chief responded, "Now, I know you lie." Are we like that with God's messengers? One difficulty for the chief is that he had no way to verify what the missionary said. As a result, his soul was unprepared for the truth he heard.

When the angels announced salvation in Jesus to the shepherds, they gave Larry, Darryl and Darryl a way to validate the claim:

***This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.*** (Luke 2:12, NIV)

The angels prepared the souls of the shepherds by giving them a path to validate the claim, and the shepherds experienced joy when they found confirmation in Bethlehem. The shepherds then were sent to prepare the souls of others. They had a tougher path to confirmation.

Bob and Betty Walker are members here at Bethany and have an uncommon ministry of healing and deliverance. Our second worship service has been populated by many who have experienced the benefit of their ministry. When Bob and Betty began their ministry in Rochester, few pastors knew about their type of ministry or trusted it. Fortunately, I had become acquainted with this kind of ministry in the late 1980s through the need and experience of some of my parishioners. When I began my doctoral work in the 1990s, I was exposed to different models of healing and deliverance and to the leaders of these models, including the model and

leadership that the Walkers had embraced. Thus, my soul was prepared to welcome the presence and work of Jesus in their ministry. Since our meeting five years ago, many other Rochester pastors have become acquainted and welcomed their ministry. However, Bob, Betty and their teams work far more with pastors and people who live some distance away. We just have trouble believing the local shepherds.

St. Paul wrote:

***But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son... that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."*** (Galatians 4:4-6, NIV)

God at the right time sent his son. It was the right time for a young woman to believe and raise Jesus. It was the right time for a young man to care for that woman and protect that son. It was the right time for men to become disciples of God's son. It was the right time for God's son to pay for our sins. It was the right time for a death and resurrection. It was the right time to forgive sins so that people could receive the full rights of sons. It is the right time for you to invite God's forgiveness and receive the full rights of sons. It was the right time for God to send the Spirit of his Son into the hearts of people who received the rights of children of God. It is the right time for God to send the Spirit of his Son into your heart so that you intimately cry out to God *Papa, Father*. It is the right time for God to send shepherds you know, who share all of your humanity, people like me (and my brother Darryl and my other brother Darryl), to prepare your soul to receive the full rights of sons, and for you to confirm this, to see it validated by asking God to forgive you for your unbelief and send the Spirit who cries out *Papa, Father* into your heart. I and others have been sent to prepare your soul. Do you believe? Is your heart aflame with God's love? Has it grown cold with hurt, guilt or anger? Now is just the right time for change. Now, is just the right time for joy!