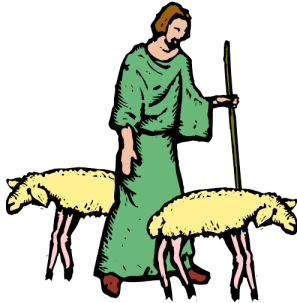


From Fear to Joy



Have you ever gone from anxiety to joy? Well these last few days, that has been my experience.

Three days ago, I was told that our organist would not be here on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. No Christmas Carols, no Christmas Music for the mass, no music of any kind. Ouch.

Our Warden was able to secure an organist for Christmas Eve, and that was covered, he said. I suppose I was a bit less anxious. But now what about Christmas Day. That was thrown into my lap—do something if you want to have music. And then the temporary organist for Christmas Eve cancelled. We were back without anybody again.

So I was on the phone, phoning here, phoning there—no luck—but then I had a brain wave—how about the 7th Day Adventists? They wouldn't be having a service on Christmas morning, because it was a Sunday this year, right? So, I phoned—only to find that their pianist would be away for the holidays. Ouch again.

And then Adam came to me—“I have a friend, named Gary, who plays the piano; could he help?” I was on the phone like a dog on a bone. Would Gary be interested? You bet he would. Relief. Anxiety ended. And now joy that the problem was solved. With Gary's help, we would have music for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. From anxiety to joy.

Now let's go to the Gospel that was just read, back to those shepherds in the field, tending their flocks, on that cold winter night. Imagine you were one of those shepherds. You were tired, a bit smelly from handling all those sheep, worried about your wife and kids sleeping back in the town of Bethlehem, but ready to bunk down across the door of the sheepfold for the night. As a shepherd, you knew that you were one of the lowest class in society. You knew that the rabbis were deeply suspicious of you because you rarely got to synagogue, rarely observed the religious rules. You just didn't have the time, or for that matter, the energy. It was all fine for the well-off people in town, but not for you out in the dark and dangerous hills. Besides, the sheep you were raising on the hills around Bethlehem were destined for the Temple Sacrifices, and they had better be safe and well cared for. That was your job. And you were concerned to do it well.

And then it happened. There was a dazzling brightness in the sky, and a figure appeared in the middle of the brightness and started to speak. What was happening? The shepherds were terrified. “Be not afraid” the voice said, “Because I bring you good news...” Good news? How could it be such “good news” when they were scared out of their wits.

And the angel continued. “Unto you is born this day, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. You will find Him wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” And then the light got even more brilliant, and the sound even louder, as a myriad of voices joined together in singing “Glory to God...” It could have been glorious if they had not been so frightened. And then it was gone. The darkness surrounded them again, and all they could hear was the baaing of the sheep and the sounds of their own hearts beating wildly within them.

It would have taken a while for them to gather their wits about them. They had been thoroughly scared—terrified if you want to know the truth. Nothing like this had ever happened to them. It was “God awful” to be accurate. What were they to do?

They could turn and run, far, far away—or they could ignore it all and put it down to the cold or hunger or an overactive imagination ... or they could obey. Obey the voice that had said to Go to Bethlehem to discover THE Child. And they decided to Obey. Gathering together, leaving someone to guard the door of the sheepfold, they trudged down the hill, across the fields, and into Bethlehem. It was not hard to know where to go—there was only one Inn, and therefore one large stable behind that Inn. There would be lots of people there, and lots of mangers—they just had to find the one that held a newborn child.

And they found Him—the Child, with Mary His Mother, and Joseph standing guard. Others were standing around talking, but all talk ceased when the shepherds arrived. Strong hulking men, with sticks, and perhaps some sheepskins, looking for the newborn Child—and then kneeling at the entrance to the stall, worshipping the Child—offering their gifts to the Holy Family. It must have been a sight for sore eyes. And the chatter started—as the shepherds told of the brilliant light, the angel voices, the singing like they had never heard before—the Glory of God like no man had ever experienced. And then the Joy, the Excitement, the faces glowing with Happiness. It was something to be remembered for ever. And as the Scripture says: “Mary pondered all these things in her heart.”

The scriptures also tell us: “the shepherds returned rejoicing.” Can you imagine the change—from terror to joy? They had seen and obeyed. And because of their obedience, they had experienced what no others had done before. They had seen the Messiah, the Christ Child—they had knelt in adoration—and now they returned rejoicing. But now they were changed—they would never be the same. For the rest of their lives, they would be new men, changed men, joy-filled men.

And it can be the same with us. You have come from your homes, your jobs, your ho-hum existence—to here, this morning, this place, this Altar. You have come, not out of fear, but in obedience to what you have heard. And here we will encounter the living God, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Leave your fears, your worries, your anxiety, your sins right here at His Altar—kneel and adore our Saviour in the Blessed Sacrament. Make a place for Him this morning; not in a manger ever again, but today in your heart. Then go on your way, like the shepherds, rejoicing. For you have gone from anxiety to Joy, from worry to Love, from sinfulness to Holiness—and walking daily with our Lord, you will never be the same again.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen