

THE QUESTION THE SHEPHERDS DON'T ASK

Christmas Eve Meditation, 2022

Text: Luke 2:8-20

The year was 1848. A passionately faithful German Lutheran missionary by the name of Johann Rebmann went where no Europeans had gone before, penetrating Central Eastern Africa in an expedition to see where the Gospel might yet be preached. Native guides took Johann Rebmann on a journey through the hot plains near the equator, where temperatures hover around 120 in the shade. At 10:00 AM on May 11, 1848, as a hazy cloud cover began to break, Rebmann saw this huge mountain rising up from the plain, filling his field of vision. The summit is covered by what he thought was a "dazzlingly white cloud", but his guide said to him, in Swahili, "*Beredi. Beredi.*" "Beredi" means "Cold." It wasn't a white cloud; it was snow. **Snow on the equator!** Rebmann just looked and looked at this 20,000 foot mountain near the equator covered with snow. He got back to his base in Mombasa, and he wrote up that he saw a 20,000 foot high snow-capped mountain right there in central Africa on the equator.

Back in London, at the Royal Geographic Society, they scoffed when they received Rebmann's report. The leader of the society was Sir Desborough Cooley. In response to the observations of Rebmann, Professor Cooley wrote these words: "*Statements as these, betraying weak powers of observation, strong fancy, and eager craving for wonders and childish reasoning could not fail to awaken mistrust by their intrinsic demerits. They have no little shape or substance and appear so severed from realities that they take on a quite spectral character.*" Or, to put it in the vernacular, "*You must have been in the jungle too long, Mr. Rebmann. Snow on the equator? That's impossible. That's ridiculous. That simply can't be true.*" Right?

Wrong. Rebmann had seen Kilimanjaro! He knew it was true, because he had seen it. The scientific scholar Cooley had his own plausibility structure, a system of beliefs rooted in facts and logic and his empirical observation (*and he didn't have a computer equipped with Google Earth*). Within that plausibility structure there was just no room for a snow-capped mountain in the middle of a plain in central Africa where the heat is 120 in the shade. There just can't be any White Christmases there! It just could not be.

And virgins don't give birth. And Kings aren't born in manglers. And nobody can turn water into wine. Nobody can walk on the water. Nobody rises from the dead. These things just could not be.

But ... the ones who wrote these pages of the New Testament have seen "Kilimanjaro!" They know these reports are true. And virtually every one of them put their life on the line because of it. They were eyewitnesses to the events in these pages. They knew that this baby born this holy night was indeed the great, grand, only hope of all time. This baby is the King of kings, the Prince of peace, the mighty God. Now, that's saying a lot for a baby. As John says in the opening verses of his gospel, "*The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*" They have seen His glory. They have seen Kilimanjaro! This is the unwavering testimony of those who wrote the Scriptures, and the consistent testimony of millions, if not billions, of faithful throughout the ages: All the hope we need is right here in the birth of the Christ child. The hopes and fears of all the years are indeed met in Him tonight.

It was just another ordinary night for the shepherds, just like all the ordinary nights that preceded it, at the end of another ordinary day of chasing sheep through the hills. Nothing special was going on. In fact, it probably has been a long, long time, if ever, since anything special has happened in their lives. They were shepherds. This was life. It was always going to be their life. There wasn't much hope for change, especially as they lived in occupied country, under the despotic rule of a slightly-crazed puppet king of the occupying Romans. Perhaps these shepherds had long ago given up any hope of something, anything, special happening in their routine, oppressed lives, when "*Suddenly an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified.*"

Now, that's surprising! Something special and exciting and different actually happened ... while they were there at work! This is surprising, but it's not the biggest surprise. The angel then said, "*Do not be afraid, for I am bringing you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you, He is Christ the Lord! This will be a sign to you, you will find a baby, wrapped cloths, lying in a manger.*" That's the great, glorious surprise of Christmas. The Savior, the long awaited Messiah, the glorious One they've all been looking for, hoping for, yearning for as the promised One Who would save them ... shows up as a baby. A baby? Why a baby? And a baby lying wrapped up like a little peasant kid in swaddling cloths and using a feeding trough for a crib. How can a baby save us?

The text tells us that right after this angel spoke, a great company of the heavenly host of angels appeared. As many of you know, the word "host" is synonymous with the word "army"; this was the heavenly army of angels arriving on the scene. However, they did not come to fight; they came to proclaim, "*Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace to men on whom His favor rests.*" If, instead of coming as a baby, the Savior came as a general, a warrior, and if He led the angelic army with their divine swords drawn instead of their angelic voices singing, maybe that would have settled matters between heaven and earth once and for all. A little heavenly shock and awe, and the whole earth would know that God is God. Change would be dramatic, everything would be fixed in a big hurry, Rome would withdraw and retreat, and all would be well! But no, according to the Bible, the Savior shows up so

quietly. So vulnerably. The hopes and fears of all the years are found in this ... baby? To any who may have not yet heard the words of this familiar story, this might sound like wishful thinking. The wishful thinking of people who are so hungry for something, anything, to happen in their dreary, oppressed lives that they may have embellished the facts. Sounds like these shepherds are a little divorced from reality. Perhaps the words of Desborough Cooley could apply here: *"Statements such as these, betraying weak powers of observation, strong fancy, and eager craving for wonders and childish reasoning could not fail to awaken mistrust by their intrinsic demerits." [They] have no little shape or substance and appear so severed from realities that they take on a quite spectral character."*

One little observation I find fascinating in Luke's account. When the angels make their announcement to the shepherds, they follow the exact same pattern the angels always follow when they are making one of these annunciations, whether it's to the shepherds, or to Mary, or to Zechariah, or even way back in the Old Testament when angels appeared to Abraham and Sarah. Here's the fundamental pattern: **First**, the angel shows up. **Number two**, the person who sees the angel is always filled with fear. **Number Three**, the angel always says, **"Don't be afraid."** **Number four**, the angel always announces some kind of good news, which usually involves the person or persons being addressed. **And the fifth thing** that usually happens is that the person(s) who sees the angel and hears the annunciation always asks something like, *"Well, how can this be? We're talking about real life, here. I'm too old, or I'm too young, or I'm not married, or I have no power, or I have no talent, or I have no money. How can this happen? Again, how can this be?"* So, first the angel appears, second the person is afraid, third the angel says, "Don't be afraid," fourth the angel announces good news, fifth the person always objects to the good news by saying, *"Well, how can this be?"*

Except for the shepherds. They break the pattern! They don't do this fifth thing about objecting to the good news. They don't stand around asking, "How can this be?" They say, *"Let's go!"* Why? I can only make an educated guess; we are not told. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that the angels made such a convincing proclamation and announcement to the shepherds that *"unto you is born this day a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord"* that they needed no more convincing. *"He's here, right here in your world, right now, today, tonight, right here in your midst!"* And perhaps the shepherds heard this overwhelming and convincing angelic proclamation that God's Savior has arrived on earth and they wanted to make every effort to go check this out for themselves and share in the joy first hand. *"Let's go to Kilimanjaro ... I mean, Bethlehem ... and see all this for ourselves!"* Perhaps to them it seemed a little silly to still be asking questions like, *"How can this be?"* It IS! Let's emulate these shepherds and take advantage of the opportunity we have to go see and encounter Him for ourselves in the moment we have! Let us go worship the new born king.

And we are told after they had done so, they joyfully and excitedly rushed out to spread the word about the Word made flesh to anyone who would hear.

Affirmation of Faith and Prayers of the People

The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth,

AND WE HAVE BEHELD HIS GLORY, ALLELUIA!

Jesus, Son of the living God, splendor of the Father, Light eternal:

GLORY TO YOU, O LORD!

Jesus, King of glory, Sun of righteousness, born of the virgin Mary:

GLORY TO YOU, O LORD!

Jesus, Prince of Peace, Mighty God, perfect in holiness:

GLORY TO YOU, O LORD!

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the Wonderful Counselor,
the Way, the Truth, and the Life:

GLORY TO YOU, O LORD!

Jesus, Joy of the angels, and Crown of all the saints:

GLORY TO YOU, O LORD!

IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME, O FATHER, YOU SENT YOUR ONLY SON JESUS CHRIST TO BE OUR SAVIOR. IN HIM, YOUR WORD, DWELLING WITH YOU FROM ALL ETERNITY, BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US. THEREFORE WE PRAISE YOU, JOINING OUR VOICES WITH THE CELESTIAL CHOIRS AND WITH ALL THE FAITHFUL OF EVERY TIME AND PLACE, WHO FOREVER PROCLAIM THE GLORY OF YOUR NAME. GIVE US A PLACE AMONG THE SHEPHERDS THAT WE MAY BEHOLD THE ONE FOR WHOM WE HAVE WAITED, JESUS CHRIST, THE MESSIAH AND LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU IN THE UNITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, WHO TAUGHT US TO PRAY, "OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE THY NAME. THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN. GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD AND FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES, AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US. AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION, BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL. FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER AND THE GLORY FOREVER, AMEN."