

"And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning the child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them" Luke 2:17-18

The silent night of the shepherds was split by a presence - non-earthly, elestial, eerie. A glory shined. Deep in the night time there were sounds and sights that no mortal had ever heard or seen. In rapid succession, the voice, the song, the fear. And the shepherds jolted awake in the dead of the night made haste from their fields to find the earth's Savior - a baby cradled in a cattle stall. Can you imagine the impact of such a tale if you were to go home and tell it?

No wonder ~~if~~ the people wondered when the shepherds were thru telling that. Men ~~had~~ have wondered for 20 centuries. They have tried their hand at retelling the story - they have told it in music, in art, in glass, in poetry and in sermon. They have told it in liturgy in large cathedral and simple church. But John Bonnell is right when he says: "Only God could have dreamed the Christmas story".

That is the heart of it. Christmas is God's story. It never was the shepherds story, nor was it ours . . . it has always been God's story, not man's. No wonder we wonder at the story, wring our hands, scratch our heads, and kneel before the awesome truth. No wonder we retell it, no wonder some cling to its every word. Thru all the centuries the

story told by the shepherds was God's story . . it was not tailored to meet the demands of a best seller or any public opinion poll.

No wonder they wondered at it. We do to. The story means so many different things to countless people. . but one towering fact remains - it is a love story.

It is a drama of divine-human love with a magnetic tug on our hearts. The attractiveness of the event cannot be explained apart from the compelling all encompassing love within the story. That is what Christmas is all about . . love which was revealed in a created event. Apart from the love we bring to it, or receive from it, Christmas can be as dreary as an all-day drizzle.

No wonder they wondered. Look at the love so thoroughly stirred and mingled in the texture of this incredible story. Let us see the loves which are lashed together in this event.

1. In the beginning there is the love of an ordinary man for an ordinary woman. We almost overlook the dimensions of the relationship between Mary and Joseph. Common and human was their love for each others. And their relationship was stretched to the breaking point by Christmas . . for they were engaged, not married, when Mary conceived.

In our day of promiscuous sex, this is not jolting. But for two pious Hebrews years ago, it was a crisis of great mag-

magnitude. Imagine what doubts and hurt Joseph had . . . for one thing he surely knew was that the baby Mary was carrying was not his. Yet the man's faith transcended his misgivings. He listened to the unseen, as God unfolded his story: "Joseph, fear not to take Mary unto thee for wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit".

And Joseph accepted this announcement and went right back to work on their relationship. He adjusted to the situation . . . and it wasn't easy, for how those Hebrews of Nazareth could talk. And according to the Jewish law, Joseph could have been accused of an illicit relationship that was punishable by death.

The wonder of it is that he stood by Mary, became her husband. He ministered to her needs, sought to find a place for her in Bethlehem, and stayed with her thru her hours of agony. He did not wait impatiently outside the delivery room door.

No mistake about it, the love of God is mirrored in that rugged carpenter of Nazareth.

No wonder they wondered, and we ought to wonder, at the dimensions of such love between a man and a woman.

2. Then how incredible love of mother for child is woven into this, God's story!

God cradled his own son in the arms of a very real flesh and blood mother. And since that distant day, the family circle has been even more hallowed - even sacramental.

No wonder we wonder. Never has the unusual been so usual, never has the uncommon been so common. Never has a woman be placed on a more awesome spot. Hers was the task of cradling in her arms the Lord of highest heaven. But she went right to work on her job.

She had been told by the angel who the child was. And on the night he was born confusion reigned there were excited shepherds, and probably many others in the stable along with the animals . . . visiting and adoring the child. Then a few days later regal visitors came bringing expensive gifts. Put yourself in the place of a mother with that kind of commotion swirling around your first-born.

By the time he was 12, he had already proved himself a match for the learned. Then when he was 30, Mary's son was judged insane by some of his countrymen. Then he was hardly 31 when he was judged to be a criminal. The citizens of Nazareth drove him out of town and since then Mary's son has not had a bed of his own. Her son chose 12 men, but she stood by helplessly while public opinion turned against him, and one of his friends doubted him, another denied him, and still another betrayed him. She was there the day they nailed him to a cross and left him in the scorching heat to die

But three days later he came to her and a month later she saw him ascend to God. After that Mary slips quietly off the

stage of this remarkable drama, and only legend remains.

No wonder we wonder,

At the love of a man for a woman; at the love of a mother for a child. And beyond that, at the love of A God for his world.

3. Central to the meaning of Christmas is the love of God translated as it had never before been translated in the gift of his Son.

Thru earthquake wind and fire, God had spoken, Thru prophet preist and king, he had spoken. Now, in his son he stakes the ultimate claim on this planet and on us

Christmas is our day. It is God's story for us. We hear the beat of a distant drummer and hang our hopes on a shining star . . . no matter what,

No wonder we wonder at the strategy of God's great love.

Look at the setting for it. It happened in Bethlehem, an off the main road town, astride a limestone ridge where, a long time before, Jacob has laid to rest his beloved wife Rachael; where Boaz had claimed Ruth for his bride; and where the prophet Samuel designated David as King of Israel. But now all the caravans by-passed Bethlehem. But tonight two born weary travelers enter the viillage in response to a taxation. After all, bureaucracy must always have more dollars to feed on.

A child is born. Not a greek God springing forth full-

grown from the head of Zeus. Not a resplendent king. In the birth, the most usual and common of human experiences, this is how God came . . . He came with a murmur of silence, and the beauty of ordinariness. And at night.

God could have picked the dawn with its variegated colors, or the twilight when the sun was setting in its glory. But it was the dead of the night he chose, as if he did not want to overwhelm the earth . . . when few would see or know it . . . then he came to visit our planet.

Christmas is God's monogram stenciled on our hearts. It says to us every morning: "You need not be a stranger here, you need not be a stranger to the living God one day longer". It is person centered; it affirms that human life, even the least of them, like the peasant girl Mary, or the carpenter, or the smelly shepherds, are the least expendable treasure of the universe.

Auden has said it in FOR THE TIME BEING: "On this day, everything became a ~~for~~ you, nothing remained an it" God is a living God, he is not concerned with proprieties, or principles, or abstractions. He loves people and he comes to the least worthy and the most neglected of them. That Good News is the mark of the God who came to earth at Bethlehem.

But it is not the mark of the God known and understood by all earth's citizens. Will Durant describes the God of Aristotle

"Aristotle's God never does anything- the has no desires, no will, no purpose. His activity is so pure that he never acts. He is absolutely perfect; therefore he cannot desire anything. His sole employment is the contemplation of himself. He is a do-nothing King, a king who reigns but does not rule"

But this is not the living God, the Father of Jesus Christ for he comes to us and loves us at close range - in the rough and tumble of life where we are. No wonder we wonder.

Remember the words of Bob Cratchitt, nephew of Scrooge.

Bob responds to Scrooge's affirmation that Christmas id humbug

"I am sure I have always thought of Christmas, when it has come around , . as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calender year, when men and women consent to open their shut-up hearts so freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave; and not another race of creatures found on other journeys. And, therefore

Uncle, tho it never has put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good"

That's a mouthful.

John said it like this "The Word was made flesh and took up residence among us, and in thme Word-in-residence is our life"

No amtter how you say it, it is the Christmas miracle, and it is even no moving toward you and your Bethlehem to be born.

OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN HALLOWED BE THY NAME THY KING-
DOM 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 TRESPASSAGAINST 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