



# Prez Release

## Good News for All People December 2004

Christmas 2004 is happening in a world that grows in complexity and refuses to morph into peace and tranquility. The pictures from Fallujah, Mosul and Baghdad remind us that 'sleeping in heavenly peace' is presently and increasingly a luxury for countless people. We, in the northern hemisphere, continue to pursue the acquisition of stuff as an opiate of choice. The image driven world we live in provides the possibility of convincing ourselves that we need not fill our virtual reality with the pain and everyday struggles of those outside our bubble of existence.

Whether a person purports to be a follower of Jesus Christ or not, the customs of the season can easily expose all of us to accounts of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Whether through Christmas carols, church services attended to appease parents/grandparents or some unintended encounter with Scripture in a Christmas card; it is hard to avoid what the Bible says about the birth of Jesus during this time of year. As I read the biblical texts associated with Jesus birth, I regularly hear things in these words that I have previously never seen. For example, I am struck by the account by St. Luke. In chapter two of Luke's account we see the situation surrounding Jesus birth. There is a huge tax and census effort that is going on. People are traveling to their family home districts to comply with this decree from the Caesar in Rome. Travel was a dicey business then as now and lodging was a tough thing to find. Hotels.com had not made its appearance and most accommodations were not the place for a pregnant woman about to give birth. But because the birth of a child does not usually take the pathway of convenience, Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem and the accommodations were pretty stark.

When I read this story I am most attracted to the shepherds to whom the heavenly announcement of Jesus' birth is given first. Unlike our idyllic pastoral view of shepherds and sheep, the shepherd was at the bottom of the social ladder. They were so despised as a profession that they were not even allowed to bear witness in a court of law. It is to these marginalized folks on a lonely hillside that the angels first announced to planet Earth that Jesus is born. I understood and preached from this text for many

Christmases, but several years ago I understood in contemporary terms what this account really meant.

I was in the small African nation of Lesotho. It was July and the height of winter in this mountain nation literally ruled by a king. Children serve as shepherds and watch and protect the herds of sheep, goats and cattle that wander the hillsides. They wear colorful blankets to keep them warm at night and I wanted a picture of one of these shepherds. The Sotho tribal elder I was with patiently stopped so I could take a picture and then said something to me I will never forget. This wise tribal elder said, "When you are shepherd in Lesotho you rise no higher in life as long as you live." I was stunned at this cultural observation, but immediately my mind went to the Luke 2 text and I now understand even more powerfully the meaning of that angelic announcement. "Behold I bring you good news which shall be for **all the people.**"

In this world where we find no lack of religious fervor we must all face the fact that representatives of the world's faith traditions at times do not fairly represent their faith tradition in concrete day to day living. No faith tradition is exempt from a fair share of poor representatives. They are easy to observe here in Springfield, in Baghdad, London or Buenos Aires.

But this Christmas I want to affirm that the account that records Christian beginnings speaks to all people, starting with those that are regularly passed by. The simple news was given to folks outside the accepted social sphere. This message so transformed the shepherds that they became the bearers of the incredible news about one who had come to give them connection to eternal purpose and establish them in a community of like followers where acceptance, not rejection, would be the order of the day.

I have seen too much tragedy in this world to be idyllic and I know that the pictures on the TV may in fact become the norm in this early part of the 21st century. But I am a follower of Jesus and this time of year I am reminded that into a world of tragedy, social injustice and violence as a way of life, Jesus was born. His life's mission transcended that stuff and 2000 years later, human attempts at destroying one another are still critiqued by a story that simply affirms that the people who society says are bottom feeders are those among whom Christian faith will first find root and thrive. So I will sing my Christmas carols, not with religious fervor nor triumphalist snobbery, but with humble amazement that I am a recipient of an eternal hope that was first told to folks that I can too easily pass by.

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