

Homily – Christmas Eve -December 24th, 2023

While baby showers have been around for a long time, gender reveal parties have only existed for less than 20 years. If you don't already know, a gender reveal



party is a party held during pregnancy to reveal the baby's sex to the expectant parents' family and friend, and sometimes to the parents themselves. To me, the real excitement is looking into the face of the newborn

child...that's the real reveal. There's nothing more beautiful and nothing more mesmerizing than the face of a baby.

When the bishops of the world met in Rome between 1962 and 1965, in what we call the Second Vatican Council, they restated the truth that the Catholic Christian faith is a revealed faith. We don't make up our faith; we open ourselves and allow God to reveal God's self and God's plan for the world to us. At least that's how it's supposed to work when we take the time to pray and discern.

The classic Christmas story, we just heard from Luke's gospel, is a story of revelation. You might call it God's reveal party. The face of the Messiah was revealed to the shepherd then, but we still need the revelation now.

Scripture stories are not written primarily from an historical point of view. That's not to say they are fiction. Underneath the history, there is another story the Scripture writers are trying to reveal to us. It's called salvation history. It's the story underneath the story. It's the story of how God is saving us, that's why it's called salvation history. Underneath the words and actions of kings, queens, presidents, and prime ministers, God is speaking and acting. God is subtle, subversive, "sly as a fox" to use Jesus' words and known only by people who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

The nativity story begins with the big wigs, the power brokers of the world. It starts with Emperor Augustus, ruler of the Roman Empire, then it moves to Quirinius, the governor of Syria, and finally it funnels down to the lowly Joseph and Mary, a couple of no-names from Galilee. Augustus may be the ruler of the earth, but he is a pawn in the larger plot of heaven. It may appear that a mandatory registration, a census, is what gets Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, but it is really God and not Caesar Augustus bringing these two to Bethlehem in order to fulfill the prophecies of old. Historically, Augustus may want to register the whole world, but it just masks the divine plan where Jesus will evangelize the whole world.

History simply tells us there was no room in the inn. But salvation history tells us that Jesus, from the very beginning will be the rejected one. He will be rejected by the chief priest and the people. His earthly life will end as it began.

History tells us about shepherds watching their flocks by night. But who are the shepherds in the world of salvation history? Shepherds are people who do not sleep at night. They are the vigilant watchers. Advent reminds us to vigilantly keep watch or we may miss the coming of the Lord in our day as many missed it 2000 years ago. You would have thought that the revelation of God's Messiah would have been given to one of the great prophets, like Moses or Elijah, but it wasn't. It was given to lowly shepherds who knew little or nothing about God or prophecies and who never went to synagogue or Temple. They are the Church's first leaders, the Church's first catechists before there even was an established Church. Historically, the shepherds are negligible, inconsequential, non-existent. In salvation history, the history God is writing, they are the first to hear the word of God, grasp its meaning and now live in loving service and loving care of all who came to believe through their witness. These shepherds receive the revelation, the truth about God, firsthand from the mouths of the angels. They do not guard their knowledge for the sake of privilege. Instead, after they find out for themselves the truth of what the angel has proclaimed, they will freely share ***“what had been made known to them.”*** They become examples of what will become a chronic concern of Christianity—how those who are fortunate enough to have faith pass

it on to others. These are the good shepherds. History can't be bothered recording their names, but salvation history own then a great debt.

Then we get to the angels. Angels are never independent contractors. They are messengers from God who appear to people on earth. They allow God to be in heaven and on earth at the same time. Whatever the angels reveal of God, we can assume that even more is concealed. Angels hold the tension of God's divine transcendence (God's total otherness) and God's immanence (God's presence to us). People usually tremble in their presence, to which the angel always says, "**Do not be afraid.**" The shepherd are afraid because the know they are in the presence of something greater than they are. We instinctively fear the greater because we cannot control it and suspect it has arrived to do us harm. But God's angels are not about gloom and destruction but about joy, a joy not for a select few but for **all the people**.

Historically, Caesar Augustus is crushing the whole world for his glory. But, in the world of salvation history, the glory of God that shines around the shepherds wants nothing for itself. Its arrival is to swell all the people with joy. The shepherd can't contain their joy, so they have to tell others.

You are not just part of history. You are participating in salvation history. God is using you, even on your worst day, to bring salvation to the world. That "good news" is almost too good to believe. Your name may not go down in history books; mine certainly won't. But our names are forever written on the palm of God's hand. Through your eyes, ears, hands and feet, the God who is sly as a fox, is bringing salvation to the world.

~Fr. Phil