

Selected Sermons #5

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

LUKE 2:16-18 Christmas Day

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Dear Fellow-worshippers before the Christmas miracle –

It will not be long now until we will sleep and awake once more and find Christmas gone, for that is in keeping with the common experiences of life on this sin-cursed Earth. How earnestly we prepare for the golden hours that are ahead, only to have them come and go swiftly over our heads! With outstretched hands we grasp for them, thinking to drink in their sweetness, but time tears them from our hands, and they melt away. Who can hold them or bid them stay? Within a week the brightness and laughter of Christmas will be no more than fragrant memory unless we learn the secret of preserving it.

Only in heaven's eternity the hours of joy will be unending – but Christmas is a bit of heaven come down to Earth. God in his infinite grace chipped off a little piece of heaven's glory and sent it to us as a sample. If we value it rightly and use it rightly, then the present festival is one of

the few occasions which need not share the fate of all our other happy moments; it need not pass away on the wings of time. Christmas was not made to pass away but to endure.

Among the many things revealed in Luke's Christmas Gospel, it teaches us this also. By the tenderest example it richly comforts us who feel today as we never did before what a poor hold we have on even our smallest joys and our shortest hours of happiness, since they can be swept away in an instant by the terrible contrary winds that humankind's sin and pride and hate have roused. Christmas, at least, was made to be kept, and blessed are we who may learn -

How to make Christmas last

- I. Learn from the shepherds, who's Christmas was short also**
- II. Learn from others for whom Christmas was over before it began**

I. Certain things are revealed by the Christmas story that we are likely to notice only after we have heard it many, many times and had occasion to observe what a short Christmas the shepherds of Bethlehem actually had. You speak about how swiftly Christmas comes and goes for us, but **consider the shepherds. What did they have of the most important day since the creation of the world? We go through a time of joyful preparation; they were**

herding sheep as their fathers had done for centuries before them.

We make a night and a day of our Christmas and perhaps a Second Christmas Day after that – but the shepherds – there they sat around their campfires in the dead of the night; dark it was, and cold; silently they were bearing the universal burden of mankind, earning their daily bread. This was their world: the sheep, their tired bodies – and who knows what worries and sorrows of mind and soul were hidden under their ragged coats? No strains of “Silent Night” came from their radios, no lighted Christmas tree cheered them – yet it was Christmas Eve. What did they have of it?

Suddenly, as the lightning flashes, they were transported into the glories of heaven. In the twinkling of an eye, the glare from God’s throne wiped out the light of their fires and drowned the world in which they lived under the curse of sin. The light made their faces and their ragged shepherd tunics glow with unbearable beauty – this was their Christmas. And what did they have of it? A **moment** of terrible fear, then a sentence of wondrous words by an angel, and one Christmas hymn by a choir that never sang for human ears before or since. That, **and then their Christmas was over!**

“Oh,” but you say “NO, it was not over! Did they not go and seek the Child and find him? Did they not see Jesus?” Surely, they went and looked at the Child, but they saw nothing that would make them feel that they were still having Christmas.

Let us forget for a moment the lovely paintings and pictures we are used to seeing in our Bibles and Bible Histories of that scene in the stable at Bethlehem, showing the manger flooded with light from a great star, and the holy Child looking up as if to welcome the shepherds and perhaps preach them a Christmas sermon. It was not like that. Those who read Luke’s Gospel know that *they came with hast, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.*

A humble setting was seen and nothing more. There was no star, no light – only a tiny, new-born baby with fists held tightly shut, sleeping or perhaps crying blindly into a dark dusty, ill-smelling world, a very tired mother, and a troubled Joseph trying to rest. Nothing here but poverty and lowliness. What was there for the shepherds to see? And when they went forth again after a brief look, the things they said to everyone were not of the wondrous Child, but of the things that were said concerning that Child. And then they went back again – back to their troublesome sheep, back to the old life of toil and trouble and sorrow, back to the cold darkness of the fields; it was

night again for them. Christmas, a brief flare of blinding glory, had come and gone.

But how those shepherds did stretch their Christmas! How they did make it last! They celebrated throughout that night and far beyond it by laying hold of the one thing which never fades – *the saying which was told them concerning this Child*. Christmas had come to them to leave behind these words: “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!” (Luke 2:11) How wise the shepherds were in their simple minds to know that the glorious light from heaven must end and leave this dying world. Once more they must continue to light their little campfires and struggle against the gloom. Yes and even the eternal Son of God must hide his glory in a body of flesh when he entered the world. But the words are the important thing, the mighty Truth, that God sent his Son to redeem all people from sin and death.

It was this word that they shared with all whom they met. We do not find them urging others to go see the Child. God’s Son was in no condition to bring Christmas to people’s hearts. Already he had begun to suffer; already he bore the world’s sin, there in the shame and lowliness of the stable – but Christmas was made a living thing by those who knew what Christmas truly is: glad tidings, good news – for all people.

If we take hold of these enduring words, these tidings, then the golden hours of this season will live on for us. How earnestly our Lord and Savior throughout his earthly life tried to teach people to lay hold of joy by listening to the words that were spoken concerning him! When the disciples of Emmaus were troubled in their hearts over his death, he did not tell them, "See me, here I am, I am not dead." Instead, he took them into the Scriptures and said, "O slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25) Thus he would say to us today, "Take the words of Christmas!"

Why make so much of the star and of the angel? Why seek to see in the Child a glory that you cannot see? These things do not make Christmas, but the *saying* – the mighty message and promise of God in heaven, "I have come to save you; I have left my throne and am descended into your darkness to bring you light and life." Indeed, we have more of such sayings than the shepherds had. The message of the angels has been expanded and magnified a thousand-fold by prophets, evangelists, and apostles; it has been set to verse and music. If those are yours, and if you are filled with them, you will see the star always in your sky, and the heavens will have open gates wherever you are.

II. Perhaps you will suspect that there were other reasons behind the **lasting Christmas of the**

shepherds. You will say that, after all, they had seen the heavens open, and they had seen the holy Child, even in his humility. Would not their experiences make Christmas more lasting for them, and not alone the words? Then let me show you how we must learn to make our Christmas last – even from **others for whom Christmas was over before it began.**

I am thinking of the people to whom the shepherds spoke. Of them we read, *“And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.”* You note that nothing is said of their going to see the Child; very probably they never got that far. **Christmas was over before they knew it had come.** The skies were dark again; even the hills no longer resounded with the whispering refrain of “Glory to God in the highest!” Thus there were common people even like you and me, in that very day, who had no Christmas at all, actually – except for the tidings. Yet the tidings were theirs, and with these they celebrated.

We are informed that they *wondered*. What do you suppose that means? When people wonder about something they have heard, it means that they are thinking about it, trying to understand it and to see what it means for them. People were doing that in those days. Herod was wondering, and his Christmas wondering lasted for two years. The Wise-men, whose only message was the

star, wondered what it meant for them and wondered so hard at it that they made a long journey. Simeon in the temple heard the news and wondered until he held the Christ-child in his arms.

The trouble with us is that we drop the glad tidings with the needles off our Christmas trees, sweep them up and put them away for another year. Down comes the tree from its special spot, down come the decorations from our windows, and off we go to our jobs and recreations and family gatherings, and Christmas is finished for another twelve months.

No, brethren, **Christmas has only begun**, if you will but take the sayings, lay them end to end and compare them, search them, live with them, and ponder in your heart what it means for you, **“Unto you is born this day a Savior.”**

Oh, it means that I have not been born in vain! I have been born not to die a miserable, lingering death in sin – but to live! It means that though the world is cursed, I am no longer under the curse! For “God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” (Galatians 4:4-5) Take these sayings and stamp them upon the door of each new day that you enter! Let their light gleam upon each condition of your life!

Are you in sorrow? Christ is here, to whom you may turn. Are you in temptation? Here is the Child who gives you victory in all temptation. Are you bereaved? Christ is here, to turn your bereavement into a celebration of victory over death and grave. Are you afflicted with injuries of heart and mind that you must bear in silence because you still love those who have injured you? Christ is here to bear the burden from your conscience. Are you two steps away from making the horrible choice to abandon spouse and family? Christ is here to guide you back into his good and gracious pathways. Christ is here, and God's **Christmas gift may endure for you.**

The Christmas that lasts is the foretaste of heaven - for what is heaven really but the complete application of God's promises in our Savior, Jesus Christ? Our God makes good on his promises.

Take that with you from this Christmas Day into tomorrow's ever-dawning Christmas! In Jesus' name. Amen!

From heaven above to earth I come #85

Come, your hearts and voices raising #90

Let us all with gladsome voice #97