

Sermon Transcript

Christmas Eve 2006

10 p.m. service

Reflection

Teresa Schwartz

We know the story:
an angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds.
The glory of the Lord shone around them.
A great light descends
on dark fields,
happy angels and cherubim
sing for joy, play their lutes,
and dance about
to defy the gravity
of earthly cares.

In our happy Christmas narratives,
we can forget
the shepherds were *afraid*.

What is this fear of God?
In my Sunday School lessons,
God was a warm fuzzy old man,
replete with grey beard,
Jesus loved me (because the Bible told me so)
and I glued cotton balls
on stiff construction paper
to make sheep for the good shepherd.

From time to time, as a small child,
I secretly opened the Bible and read.
It didn't take long to find God and fear
mingled together in the same lines.
I didn't understand
but I knew it wasn't about fuzzy cotton balls.

In the Hebrew scriptures,
the "Fear of God" is an active obedience to the divine will.
But I think it's also a shaking
a shaking of body and soul
awe at something
wholly other, something catches,
my heartbeat quickens,
and I shake, even a little, at the thought of those
strange glimpses that brought me to my knees

The numinous
is a mystery
that terrifies and fascinates us.

We are tempted to reduce the whole of
the Christmas story
to a kinder, gentler God,
somewhat akin to the jolly and portly fellow in the red suit,
we wrap our seasonal theology
neatly with a red bow.

But what we have here are
terrifying and fascinating
dreams and apparitions.

Enough to make you lay down your work
and follow your vision.

That's what the shepherds did.
They ran from that place in search of the strange, the holy

What star are we waiting for
to lay down our labors
and follow a vision?
A strange vision?
A frightening glory?
Peculiar and unfamiliar fancies
that we would risk losing the labors of our day
to a brilliant, crazed moment in the night?

Could we hear the bizarre voices at all?
Or are we too busy tending our sheep
to see the hand of God in the strange turns of our lives?

The shepherds ran,
ran, leaving their sheep
and the one they ran to
would tell the fishermen
to lay down their nets,
leave their fish,
run,
run to be fishers of men
and women
and dreams.

For a moment
follow the dream,
the hope
despite your shaking

Receive the annual invitation,
face the awesome vision,
lay down your labors,
abandon all reason
for now, once again, God is with us,
and we can risk our daytime sensibilities
for strange dreams
and fearful fascinations.
Run across the muddy, cold fields.