

Christmas Spirit  
Rev. George M. Schwab, Ph.D.  
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Luke 2:13 – 14

(NA 27<sup>th</sup> ed.)

(NRSV)

καὶ ἐξαίφνης ἐγένετο σὺν τῷ ἀγγέλῳ	And suddenly there was with the angel
πλῆθος στρατιᾶς οὐρανοῦ	a multitude of the heavenly host,
αἰνούντων τὸν θεὸν καὶ λεγόντων·	praising God and saying,
δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῶ	“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη	and on earth peace
ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας.	among those whom he favors!”

In line 2, for *plēthos* think “plethora;” for *stratia*, “strategy.” “Uranus” is Latinized *ouranos*, “heaven.” In line 4, *doxa* of course is in “doxology.” A *hypometer* measures altitude. Line 5, English “irenic” means peaceable. And note NRSV’s apt gender neutral use of “those” instead of Greek “men,” line 6.

I first became aware that all was not calm and bright in Bethlehem when I discovered that the word used for the heavenly “host” is a military term. War in heaven, already? He was just born! You also might notice the terrible atrocity of what Herod did in killing the infants to try to get Jesus. This introduces us to the idea that Jesus’ coming would be a bloody business.

There have survived from antiquity four lists of disreputable people, such as: dung shovelers, tax collectors, and prostitutes. The lists vary, but on every list can be found shepherds. They were the bottom rung of society, and it is to these sorts of people that Heaven announced salvation. Right from the beginning, it is clear that Jesus’ ministry would be in a collision course with the respectable and the religious. Jesus would hang around with the wrong sorts of people. He would make God too accessible. And finally, out of jealousy and misguided religiosity, they would kill him for it.

So you can see that the Christmas stories in the gospels have much to say to those of you who feel outside God's family, or who just can't get into the so-called "Christmas Spirit." This is true in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

In Luke, the heavenly army announced Christ's coming. Can you identify with Mary who was told that her heart would be pierced? What was to come would be painful to her. What Herod's victims experienced in seeing their infant sons killed, Mary would later experience at the cross. Simeon even calls baby Jesus the "apocalypse of the nations" (Luke 2:32).

Out of turmoil and political intrigue and bloody oppression, this baby enters the world. The infancy narratives are less like Silent Night and more like the Battle Hymn of the Republic. So if you can't feel the peacefulness of O Little Town of Bethlehem, perhaps Christmas is yet for you.

However, if you are like Herod—thinking it is all about you—then maybe you need to re-examine your priorities. Are you are so comfortable with your relationship with God that you indulge in feeling more spiritual than others around you? If so, maybe you don't "get" Christmas. I challenge you to try to identify with the lowly dung shovelers and shepherds, and give up the illusion that you have your act together. Jesus was born for those who do not have their act together, and it was to such as these that his birth was announced.

I don't know about you, but this is contrary to how I usually think of Christmas. I think of it as pretty harmless and inoffensive to all. Of course, the world knows better, and every season we are treated to news reports of someone somewhere, be it a public official, a school board, a business, who bans candy canes or Christmas trees or whatever. We think, what do they have against the baby?

But they perceive that this story is really about how God sent his Son into the world to do all the things Christians say he did. It's not just about the Baby. It's really about the Man, and how he came to seek and to save the lost. I encourage you to think about Christmas this way. It's really about the whole of the gospel.

Christian people, like Mary your hearts will also be pierced. You will have cause to grieve. And Christmas is for you. The promise is that peace will come in the end. The Christmas Spirit is to confront the turmoil of this world and the turmoil of our own hearts with the peace offered in Christ and his everlasting gospel. This is what our hymns look forward to. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!