

SERMONSECOND  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

460 East Main Street

Lexington, Kentucky 40507

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Rev. Dr. Thomas P. Groome III

*We Interrupt This Program*

Luke 2:1-20

Once in a great while, as you are watching television or listening to the radio, an announcer will suddenly break in and say, “We interrupt this program to bring you an urgent news bulletin.”

Our Scripture reading tells about such an occurrence. Some shepherds were watching over their flocks in a field near Bethlehem when suddenly an angel appeared and said, in effect, “We interrupt this night to bring you an urgent news bulletin: the Messiah has just been born a few miles away.”

Today, the celebration of Christmas is a routine that has been handed down for centuries. When it all began, it was a startling intrusion into the life of the world.

The visit by the angel to the shepherds was an electrifying event. I would assume that most angelic visits would be startling. In reality, this is how most people experience the activity of God—as a surprising interruption of their lives. Please note that I am speaking about the way people experience *the activity of God*, not the way people experience religion.

There is a difference. Religion is not the activity of God; it is the activity of human beings. At its best, religion is a creative human response to what God is doing—a stimulating, challenging relationship with God and fellow believers, in which our minds are stretched, our souls are energized, and our lives transformed by the working of the Holy Spirit.

At its worst, religion is a repetitive routine of traditional rituals and formulas, propagated by an elite hierarchy, whose effect is to foster conformity and the perpetuation of the status quo, instead of creativity and change. That kind of religion is about as far from the activity of God as anything can get. I have heard people say that the important thing is for people to have some kind of religion—it doesn’t matter what, any kind will do. The Bible says the exact opposite. The Bible says that the important thing is for people to become aware of, and involved in, the activity of God in the world.

Why was it that the birth of Christ came as a shocking interruption? Is it because God is unpredictable and capricious? Is it because God makes up God’s mind on the spur of the moment? Not at all. In fact, it’s just the opposite. God had been planning the birth of Christ from the beginning of creation. The Bible is quite clear on this point. Jesus’ coming was *according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God* (Acts 2:23). God has revealed God’s plan to humanity again and again, through the writings of the prophets, for centuries before the birth of Christ. The Gospels and Jesus Himself repeatedly quote various prophetic utterances as having predicted his

ministry in the centuries before he came (examples, Matthew 2:6 quoting Micah 5:2; Luke 4:18-19 quoting Isaiah 61:1-2; John 12:15 quoting Zechariah 9:9, and so on).

No, the activity of God so often comes as a surprising interruption because many of us are living lives cut off from communication with God. We are all wrapped up in ourselves and in the petty concerns of a life motivated by self-interest and the desire for immediate gratification. And so people are unconscious of what God is doing, until God breaks in upon them as a surprising interruption, just as He did with the shepherds on that first Christmas.

God's interruptions are always good news. C.S. Lewis entitled his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. Up until he reached middle age, Lewis had neither awareness of nor interest in God at all. He had lived a life that was completely preoccupied with worldly ambition and pleasure. But then, in mid-life, he was surprised, as were the shepherds, when God burst into his life in a series of events that are chronicled in his autobiography. At first he was alarmed and frightened; but as he experienced the reality of God's presence, his anxiety turned into joy and happiness deeper than anything he had ever dreamed possible.

God's interruptions differ from those that flash across our television screens and over our radios. Those interruptions are usually made in order to bring us news of great disasters and tragedies, such as earthquakes, tornadoes, bombings, and assassinations. But God's interruptions bring us news of joy, peace, opportunity, hope, and love. The angel said to the shepherds, *Behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which shall be to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord . . . Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.*

This visit to the shepherds was really a visit to all of us. The shepherds were just representatives of the whole human race. They represented you and me. And through them, the angels visit is also a visit to us, and the message is for us.

The message invites a response from each of us, just as it did from the shepherds. They responded by going to Bethlehem and seeing the newborn Savior, and then spreading the good news throughout the villages and countryside, adding their voices to the angelic chorus of praise and glorification.

How have we responded? How will we respond today, and tomorrow? Have we listened carefully to make sure that we understand this good news? What does this birth really mean to us in practical terms? Have we accepted, by faith, the Savior and the salvation that He offers us? Have we become active spreaders of the good news, and added our voices to the chorus of praise? And not just for the Christmas season, but for the whole year.

May the blessing of the Christ Child, who shows us purity and purpose, innocence and grace, love and compassion, be with you and yours, both now and always.