

Keeping Watch with the Shepherds in Bethlehem

And shepherds were keeping watch in the night!

When the Gospel of Luke recounts the Christmas story, it tells us that, when Jesus was born, shepherds were keeping watch in the night. What were they watching for in the dark? For more than for what might threaten their flocks. They were looking for light, for something to brighten their darkness.

John's Gospel makes this point. It does not give us a description of Mary and Joseph in a stable at Bethlehem. Instead it describes the coming of Jesus at Christmas in an image, a light shone in the darkness. Notice that John does not say that a light shone into the darkness, but that it shone in the darkness. That is an important distinction.

Christmas, Christ being born in our world, is very much about finding God inside of what is commonplace and inside even the darkness of sin, violence, war, greed and the indifference that sometimes seem everywhere. Christmas is about light being seen inside of darkness.

And so one of the things that Christmas asks us to do is to imitate the shepherds in the Christmas story and keep watch, hoping to see "light inside of darkness." How do we do that?

Our Christian tradition has different ways of expressing it, but it is what Jesus meant when he told us to "read the signs of the times" and what John of the Cross meant when he said that "the language of God is the experience that God writes into our lives." God is inside ordinary life and our job is to see God there.

Classically, this was expressed in the concept of *divine providence*, namely, the notion that inside the conspiracy of accidents that shape our lives, we can see the finger of God writing history from another point of view. God shines forth, in some way, in everything that happens.

We need therefore to be meteorologists of the spirit, reading inner weather so as to see the deeper movements of God inside the outer events of history. We watch like the shepherds when we look at our world, with all that is in it, both good and bad, and see light there, namely, God's presence, grace, graciousness, forgiveness, love, unselfishness and innocence.

But that is not easy to do. The darkness around us is deep. We live in a world where what we see is often simply bitterness, wound, non-forgiveness, anger, greed, false pride, lust, injustice and sin. Where do we see light inside of that? Do you see light in the 6:00 news each night?

Christmas tells us that the problem is not just with the news, but with how we see the news. What we see is very much coloured by

what we feel and think at any given moment. Philosophers used to express this in the axiom, "Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver." Sound wisdom. The Buddhists put it more simply. They have an axiom, which says that we do not see what is outside of us but we see what is inside of us and project it outside. To illustrate this they offer a colourful little anecdote.

A fat, overweight Buddha was sitting under a tree one day. An arrogant, young soldier walked by, saw him and said, "You look like a pig!" The Buddha looked up at the soldier and said, "And you look like God!" Surprised, the soldier asked him, "Why do you say that I look like God?" The Buddha replied, "You see, we do not see what is outside us, we see what is inside and project it outwards. I sit here all day and think about God and when I look out, that is what I see. You, on the other hand, must be thinking about something else!"

The point, I think, is clear. Our eyesight, even our physical eyesight, is linked to our attitudes, our thoughts, our feelings, our wounds and our virtues. They form the prism through which we see. The task therefore, to keep watch in the night, is to link our eyesight to the virtues of Christmas. What are these?

Christmas speaks of childlikeness, wonder, innocence, joy, love, forgiveness, family, community and giving. When we are in touch with these, we more easily see what is special inside of ordinary life. These make light shine in the darkness.

Sometimes, just as at the first Christmas, we see light in darkness most clearly in the face of a newborn, a baby, where innocence can still stun us into wonder and soften, for a while, the edges of our cynicism and hardness. That, in fact, is one of the main challenges of Christmas.

Like the shepherds we are asked to watch in the night. We are watching when, in our hearts, there is more wonder than familiarity, more childlike trust than cynicism, more love than indifference, more forgiveness than bitterness, more joy in our innocence than in our sophistication, and more focus on others than on ourselves.

Christmas is meant to soften the heart and it is that which sharpens the eyesight.

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Editor's note: Fr. Rolheiser's weekly column appears in CPCO's weekly electronic magazine, *Catholic Principals' Connection* and can be found on his website at www.ronrolheiser.com.