

12-25-2011

Church of the Epiphany

In today's gospel the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds and said, "Do not be afraid." This is the third time when the angel of the Lord said, "Do not be afraid." In Luke's gospel the angel appeared to a priest Zechariah, saying "Do not be afraid" for the first time. And then to Mary. And now to the shepherds. The angel of the Lord said to them, "Do not be afraid." Whenever I read the beginning of this gospel, I wonder why they were afraid. There is an historical and anthropological answer for this fear: In Hebrew tradition it was said that human being cannot see the face of God directly. If you see the face of God, you must die. Very often an angel, a messenger of God was thought to reveal God's glory. So to see an angel directly is the same to see God's face directly. Therefore they were afraid when they saw the angel of the Lord. But that's it? I don't know. Still I'm not sure what made them fear.

A priest Zechariah, he belong to the establishment of Jewish society but he felt the political and social tension between Roman Empire and its colonial state Judea, I guess. The angel of the Lord appeared to him

and told something unbelievable.

For the second time the angel of the Lord appeared to Mary. People in modern era think Mary as a young woman when she saw Archangel Gabriel. But if we think her age from the view of traditional Jewish custom in those days, some scholars say she was between 12 and 16, Joseph 16 and 18. She was told she would bear a son. She did not marry with Joseph yet. What was waiting for her if people of her village recognized she was pregnant? Death by stoning! The angel of the Lord told Mary something unbelievable and horrible.

Now for the third time the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds. What kind of image do you have when you think of shepherd? I imagine a cowboy riding on the horse back with rope and chasing flocks of sheep. Maybe this is an image from modern western movies. In ancient Israel shepherds were not always welcomed, especially by peasants. Because the pasture of flocks damaged the lands and crops of the peasants. The peasants thought shepherds were starveling bandit and the shepherds thought that the peasants were mean-spirited digger. And for the establishment like Roman Empire and Temple authority they were one of

dangerous elements causing social instability. So I think they realized they were in some sense outsiders of Jewish society. To them the angel of the Lord appeared and said: "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day ... a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." The angel of the Lord told them something unbelievable and incomprehensible.

"Do not be afraid!" The angel of the Lord said three times. It's very hard not to be afraid because we have many things to worry about. Maybe the worries of Zechariah, Mary and shepherds were more serious and harder than mine. But the angel of the Lord said to them, "Don't be afraid."

Two weeks ago I adopted a 6-month-old kitten from our neighbor. Here is one of her pictures; it's my most favorite one. There is a Japanese word, "Oya-baka". "Oya" means a parent and "Baka" "fool, silly, stupid". So "oyabaka" means "a doting parent." When I took this picture, I felt I was an "Oya-baka". But I love this picture because this kitten was so innocent and vulnerable, sleeping peacefully with our house dog Stanley. When I took this picture, I was moved by the

gentleness of this kitten and forgot all worries in my heart. Today Jesus Christ was born. Let's have a look at this infant Jesus sleeping peacefully in manger, in our heart. Two thousand years ago the shepherds saw this baby sleeping in manger. Today God is inviting us to join the joy and peace the shepherds experienced two thousand years ago. "Do not be afraid." The angel of the Lord said. But there is no fear in the gentleness and meekness of Jesus. We have Jesus in our heart. We share his gentleness and meekness. There is no fear for us. Jesus Christ was born today. The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us all. Merry Christmas!!