

Sermon: Christmas Eve, 24 December 2006
Isaiah 9:2-4,6-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-4; Luke 2:1-14

When I lived in California, I went to the old town of San Juan Bautista to see “La Pastorela,” an ancient Spanish Colonial Christmas play. It is performed in the old Franciscan mission, with its whitewashed adobe, a red tile roof, a long colonnade along one side, and an inner courtyard with a well and roses—still an active parish. The interior, with its arches and windows, is traced with leaves, scrolls, stars, flowers, waves, and every exuberant bounce geometry can give to a surface. A balcony for the choir and organ hangs over the main door at the rear of the nave. A pulpit hangs off the wall halfway down the side, well over the heads of the congregation. The two side aisles are inhabited by stiff, flat-footed, round-eyed saints, staring out of their chapels. The entire wall behind the altar, from floor to ceiling, is carved wood, touched with gold-leaf and crowded with still more saints—a cross-section of heaven.

The nave was full with an expectant crowd. Suddenly, a conch shell is blown, and a figure dressed in white armor appears before the altar. It is the Archangel Michael, announcing that the play is to begin, and immediately from the back, singing God’s praises with guitars and tambourines, shepherds walk down the aisle. They are all dressed as Mexican peasants: white baggy pants and ponchos for men, embroidered blouses and full flouncy skirts for women. When they reach the center of the church, the shepherds settle in to keep watch over their flocks by night.

Suddenly, there is an explosion of noise behind us. We all turned around startled and—oh, what a transformation! Hanging from the balcony in the back was a huge yawning Mouth of Hell, framing the door to the

outside, with glaring blood-shot eyes and jagged teeth, belching smoke, illuminated by a sultry light. Clearly, to leave the church is to enter Hell. Above it, riding this red and ravenous face, is Lucifer, dressed as a Mexican landowner, with spangled chaps and a ruffled shirt, a scarlet cumberbund and an omniverous black cape. He is angry and frightened. He knows only a little: he can predict evil and can see the future of suffering, but gropes about in the dark when it comes to the good. Somehow he knows that God is up to something. He doesn't know where or when, but he will sniff it out. "I am the lord of this world," he snarls. "If any of you find out anything and hide it from me—you know what I do to those who defy me! It is pointless to try to deceive me. You and all your ways are known to me. Nothing that happens here can be hidden from me. No one escapes me." Then Lucifer disappears in a frightening red explosion.

At this point, the Archangel Michael leaps into the pulpit and blows his conch shell. "Messiah is born to save you all," he calls out; "go to Bethlehem to greet him." Then up at the altar, all the lights come on, and the angels rush out and sing Gloria, and the shepherds join in, and all bustle about singing and preparing for the journey.

Well, if Lucifer was upset before, he is furious now. Another explosion of fireworks and the maw of Hell glows again. Lucifer rolls out from the mouth of Hell on an enormous wooden horse, eight feet tall, painted black and red, with sharp fangs and snake's eyes. Something must be done to stop the shepherds, since they are the only ones who know of this birth. So Lucifer dispatches a wiggly-fingered and flickery-tongued devil to trick the shepherds into abandoning their quest for the Savior. They must return to acting as if God's intervention for their good had never happened.

Meanwhile the angels, with staves tipped with stars of gold foil, streaming gold tinsel, gather the shepherds and lead them up one side aisle and down the other, and the shepherds follow, praising the God they have heard of, but not yet seen.

Their first temptation is rather innocent. Since the journey is long, they decide to sleep on the way. One of them agrees to keep watch, but dozes off. The devil sent by Lucifer appears and sprinkles the sleeping shepherds with dust, so now they all look like sheep. The shepherd on the watch wakes to find himself surrounded by lambs and ewes and rams. The devil reappears and claims to be a disenchanting sheep-owner. "I am so tired of sheep," he sighs. "They get lost, they bleat, they smell. If only I could find someone to take them, I would give them all away." The shepherd, of course, is quite interested. He has only cared for the sheep of others; to own his own flock would be a step up. "Take them," moans the devil; "they're yours; only take them away now, immediately, and go back where you came from." The shepherd greedily agrees, and he begins to prod his companions with his crook, still thinking they are sheep, to wake them up and herd them to his home. Oddly, these sheep seem to talk back! And suddenly the conch shell is heard again, and Michael breaks the spell and redirects them all to Bethlehem. They laugh at their escape. Once again, their joyful march is heard and they process around the nave.

As the shepherd head up the aisle toward the altar this time, Lucifer's deputy devil meets them again. This time he is dressed gorgeously, as an Asian potentate, and arrives on a flying carpet, cleverly hung from his waist. How delightful that shepherds have arrived: happy carefree shepherds! "In my kingdom," he grins, "I have no sheep, so all shepherds do there is dance

and sing and eat and sleep. What I wouldn't give to have more shepherds in my kingdom! And I have gifts for you! Look!" And he brings out the softest rippling scintillating silks for the women and the most lushly endowed belly-dancers for the men. "Will you come?" he asks; and all the shepherds eagerly agree and ask where his kingdom is. "There," the devil says, and he points behind them to the yawning yearning mouth of Hell, that glows while he talks. The shepherds notice none of that. They turn and rush pell-mell down the aisle towards Hell—and just in time, Michael reappears and blows his conch shell. The spell dissipates, but they are frightened: they almost fell for it. They circle the nave less joyfully now.

As the shepherds head up the aisle towards the altar and Bethlehem this time, Lucifer himself comes out to meet them. He is enraged at the two failures, so now he himself will stop the shepherds. With deep scorn, deeply hidden, he smiles with concern over their pointless wistful daydream of salvation. "You are shepherds," he says; "nothing will change that." And he sighs sympathetically. "I don't blame you for wanting things to be different; you live a hard life. But all life is hard, and everyone who suffers wishes things were different. It is only ignorance that has you rushing towards Bethlehem, though. No happiness waits for you there. Let me tell you about this newborn. He is born in a barn from an unwed mother. He is poor, like you; wretched, like you; despised, like you. He will grow up to be a carpenter. Can a carpenter offer you wealth and power and pleasure? His neighbors won't be convinced by him. Is that the leader you want?"

"And look at this...." And then behind Lucifer, the demons bring out a cross, stained with blood, with a wreath of briars hanging from it. "The one you were ready to follow," Lucifer sneers, "this is how he will die."

Then Lucifer reaches for the crown of thorns and pulls it down onto his own head. He tears open his splendid clothes and stretches out his arms along the cross, twisting his legs along the stem. Then the demons lift him up, and Lucifer begins to describe Jesus' final hours. "You will all desert him. He will even be betrayed by one of you. His dream will fail, like yours." Little by little, as he speaks, Lucifer's own anguish begins to scrape through his voice. "You won't even recognize what he once was. Beaten, driven out of the Holy City, nailed to his death, he will hang there, bleeding and gasping. And this is how he will die...." Then, Lucifer throws back his head and screams up into the vaults of that mission church, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And having hurled that cry over the heads of the horrified shepherds out of his own dereliction, Lucifer slumps against the cross, silent.

All eyes are fixed on that tangled shape. Then slowly Lucifer glances at the devils, raises his head, and bares his fangs in a civil grin. The devils burst into applause. Then Lucifer steps down off the cross and glares at the shepherds: "That's it; that's what will happen; that's all there is." In saying that, the troubler of humanity slams his heart shut. Neither faith nor doubt, those twin guides to God, are welcome to him. Lucifer insists dissolution and disillusion are all that we know or ever can know.

Michael appears again, blowing his conch shell, but this time he cannot revive the stunned shepherds. So he blows again: a battle call. Suddenly the church is filled with angels and devils, who fight until only Michael and Lucifer are left. They fight to exhaustion, breaking their swords and bursting their armor, until finally they stand face to face. Then

Michael reaches out, slowly and gently places the palm of his hand on Lucifer's heart, as if to open it, and Lucifer collapses.

Instantly the church was filled with light, and all the angels and shepherds marched around the nave again, and this time up the full length of the center aisle, up to the altar, where Mary and Joseph, both about five years old, waited for them with a chubby Christ doll. Mary and Joseph were so excited they could not sit still. The music was filling the church, and Mary simply couldn't put out any more dignity and began to bounce up and down in time to the music, grinning and waving the Christ doll. As is traditional, the shepherds brought gifts--a basket of eggs, a pitcher of milk, a shawl, some carved toys—and they sang and danced for the Holy Family. The night I saw the play, Mary lost interest in the singing, dumped the Christ doll, and went over to inspect the gifts, until she found the most particularly interesting toy, which she held for the rest of the play.

But it wasn't over yet. Now, out of the mouth of Hell, one by one, the devils also come forward, and also kneel and sing at the manger. Last of all, even Lucifer walks the length of the aisle and bows to the Holy Family and finds a place. All is restored. All is rapt in praise.

This, of course, is the point. The goal of God's love is the mutual opening of life to life, the pouring of life into life. The intention of the Incarnation is that we will live in God and God in us. The early Church was willing to believe that all things would be restored in the end, some claimed even Lucifer would return. How could there be fullness of joy otherwise? How could God ever abandon what God had created? What power, even demonic, could conceivably resist the love of God?

They were right to live in this hope. God will do better things than we can ask or imagine. God continually rejoins heaven and earth and reopens the future for us, if we will only accept and receive with gratitude what has been done for us. It begins again today, in the midst of the swift brief course of our life. Now is Bethlehem. You are the manger in which what is newborn can be received and warmed. The journey of the shepherds, up the aisle to the altar, is the journey you take every week in the Eucharist, to see and handle the Body and Blood of Christ, to arrive where you can pray, to receive a bit of God, in Whom all is restored.

That night, at San Juan Bautista, we all sang then. As we left the mission church, the cast lined the aisle to the main door facing us. The jaws of Hell were gone; outside we could see the village square and the dark starry night. The actors sang and clapped and sang and smiled and sang and shook our hands and surrounded us with singing, praising the Creator, and the Virgin Mother, and the Newborn Child, as we left. May we also live in that praise. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and knowledge of God's will acting always for our good, today and forever.