Christmas Eve 1982
FROM THE SHEPHERD'S POINT OF VIEW

The other night I bumped into Santa Claus. A good bump it was too! This Santa didn't have white cotton whiskers or a red suit, but she was the real thing all right! Santa Claus in the flesh and plenty of it too.

She was a lady who had packages dangling from every limb. And my bump made her drop them. As I was trying to pick up the packages, she said, "Oh, I hate Christmas anyhow! It turns everything upside down." I answered, "That's just what it is made for. It does turn everything upside down."

I don't think she understood what I meant, and I didn't take time to explain. She was in a hurry. So let me explain it to you. Christmas turns things upside down and inside out. That's why it was no accident that the first announcement of the baby in the manger was not made to Herod in his palace in Jerusalem; not to Augustus Caesar on his throng in mighty Rome; not to the chief priests and scribes; not to any of those we often think of as the powerful and important ones in this world. Rather the announcement was made to the shepherds, abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

Christmas is filled with surprised. It rearranges the world parade. It turns things upside down. As the world arranges its affairs, usually comes first in importance, leading the parade, the Big Shots. Then at the tail end, as of little importance, trudge the weary, the poor, the lame, the halt and the blind.

But Christmas puts a new value on every individual. A person is not a thing to be used, not a chemical accident. Everyone is a VIP because he or she has diving worth. Shepherds in the field are as valuable, as much loved by God, as kings in palaces and priests in the temple. The man or woman in prison has as much worth in God's eyes, as the Pope in Rome.

To help us understand this, imagine for a moment that you had been a shepherd near Bethlehem that first Christmas Eve. What would have been your reaction to the stunning announcement? What would you have remembered and reported? Probably the same things that the original shepherds remembered and reported.

1. First, the experience for them was so overwhelming, so unexpected that they were filled with fear. They remembered their fear, but more importantly they remembered the comforting announcement — "Do not be afraid."

Why were they afraid in the first place? Why would you have been afraid? Because the vision and the announcement were unexpected. They were totally surprised. And when we are surprised, our first response can be fear because some surprised bring good news and others bring bad news.

Surprise! You receive an unexpected letter from the Internal Revenue Service. Does it mean a refund or an audit? Fear! Then you open the envelope, and you find out it it's good news or bad news.

So, we can understand the shepherds. They are surprised at midnight. But then comes the announcement — "Do not be afraid! For behold I bring you good news of a 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!"

And then an even bigger surprise — the Savior of the world is a baby in a manger. God enters the world the way each one of us has entered the world. The Savior is not a new King David who will make Israel a military power again — a strong nation. The savior of the world is not an arsenal of nuclear weapons, not the armed forces of any nation. Surprise! The announcement is not made to the so-called big shots of the world or the important people because they wouldn't have believed it anyway. They and we believe in other kinds of saviors; not a baby in a manger who grows up and lets himself be crucified.

Perhaps the guests in the inn that night, where there was no room for the savior, were discussing the glorious future of the Roman Empire. Maybe some were saying — "Rome will last forever."

And while this was going on, while the important people made plans and thought they were dealing with the eternal issues, God surprised the world in the birth of a baby and the shepherds were the first to know and believe.

When the baby became an adult there were even more surprises. Jesus taught that God sides with the oppressed of the world and redeems the world by means of the humble and lowly. And the world continues to be turned upside down. "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." "Blessed are the peacemaker, for they all be called children of God."

That's in stark contrast to what we usually believe. We like to think that those who are first will always be first — that those who are at the head table at our banquets will be at the head table at God's banquet. But not so, said Jesus.

2. The second thing the shepherds remembered and reported from their point of view, the most amazing and surprising, the second part of the message to them had been — "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among all people in who God is well pleased."

Notice the order of the proclamation that the shepherds heard — first priority: Glory to God, and when God is given glory, then comes peace on earth. Christ is the peace-bringer. Give glory to God!

Peace is the greatest hope and desire of all of us. We want personal inner peace, and we want peace in our relationships with one another and we want peace between the nations-peace in the world at large.

But how? The shepherds must've wondered. How can a baby in a manger bring peace on earth? They, like most of us, must've believed that peace comes from strength, not from the kind of weakness exhibited in a baby; not from giving glory to God.

But again, Christmas turns our world and our thinking upside down. Give Glory to God! Worship God! Not weapons, or nuclear weapons or MX missiles or military might, or worldly power. Only God's suffering love as revealed in the baby in the manger and Christ on the

cross, is the true peace-bringer and peacekeeper. To call a missile “the peacekeeper,” is from the Christian point of view — blasphemy.

The love of God, born in a baby at Bethlehem, is the true light that shines in the darkness and enlightens the world and us, not the light that comes from the explosion of a bomb.

The good news is that this light which comes from God can never be put out. No darkness has more power than this light from God. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. The love of God can never be snuffed out or ultimately defeated. The love of God became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Glory to God in the highest. Amen.