

Christmas 2011 “Claim your Inheritance”

“This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:7)

Imagine that you are at home one evening enjoying the quiet in front of the fire, feeling full from a fine dinner and in the company of family or friends. You all are gathered there just together. There is not much conversation, just contentment in being together. And then suddenly you hear a loud knock on the door. Startled you rise to your feet and head for the door and open it. On your doorstep stands a very official looking man, all dressed up with a briefcase in his hand. He asks you your name and then nods his head. *“Yes, I’ve come to the right place. May I come in? I have some news to share with you.”*

You begin to wonder. Good or bad? His demeanor tells you nothing. You invite him in, take his coat and offer him a cup of coffee or tea. By now, the entire company that is gathered is curious. There is anticipation in the air. When he is settled in a chair, tea in hand, he finally gets down to business. I come to you from afar, he says. *“You are heir to a great fortune that is more vast than even I know. I am the messenger not the giver. The fortune will make you not only a rich person but will enable you to do great things, to travel, to help others, to transform your community and family and even possibly the world. You will receive some papers and confirmation of this in the days and years to come, but know that it is true and your life will be different if you accept this inheritance”*. Then the man puts down his cup, puts on his coat and walks out the front door and disappears. You sit there wondering if what you saw and heard was real.

Now I’m not talking about Publisher’s Clearinghouse with all the publicity and fanfare. I’m talking about news that comes in the night. And perhaps even in a time when you had lost hope and vision for what your life could be. News that happens in a way that might make you ask: “What was that?”. What would you do? How would you respond?

Those shepherds on that hillside were not expecting visitors either. Often spoken of as being poor and dirty, shepherds actually had a good reliable job and therefore a reasonable income. Often they were the sons of the owners of the herd. Sometimes they were hired for the job. It was constant physical work. And the night watch could be cold in the winter, but they would have had warm woolen cloak to keep warm while they guarded the sheep. They would not have been rich but might have dreamed of being so.

Luke’s story doesn’t really tell us much about the shepherds themselves, but only that they had a vision and were led to Bethlehem to see if what they had heard was true. It was a strange message. They told Mary and Joseph about what they had

heard and then they left praising God and giving thanks that something wonderful had happened. We don't hear any more about what they did next or if their lives were changed by this encounter with Christ.

Ever since Jesus rose from the dead, his followers have been trying to interpret the meaning of his life among us. One of the prominent metaphors used to describe Christ and his effect on us and the creation is the metaphor of inheritance.

First, the early Christians described Christ as an heir:

1Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

Then, the poor among us:

Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? (James 2:5)

Then, those who suffer:

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' 16it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:15-17)

Then, those who believe:

"And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:29) "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba, Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir of God through Christ. (Galatians 4:6-7)

So, what is our inheritance in Christ that is announced and proclaimed on this day? What is waiting for us to claim? How do we describe it?

This inheritance does not make us rich in material things or power or influence. Through the grace of God, we become rich in life – life that is larger than the material world, life that continues through death. We are inheritors of a kingdom that is in this world but does not belong to it. It is a kingdom that is known through

compassion, mercy, justice, peace and love that is spread in the world around us through our actions and our very being. It is an inheritance that only affects us if we choose to give our lives to it, claim it and engage it in everything we do.

And this inheritance is there always for us to claim – at least until our physical death. If we don't accept it, others will and we will be sitting in that room by the fire wondering what happened to our life.

When I was in Madison, Wisconsin for Thanksgiving my sister and I went to the art museum which had a newly opened wing. The new section was very interesting and filled with contemporary art that sometimes baffles me, so we kept walking through to see the older section which contained a room filled with large Renaissance works. One of the paintings was a scene showing the shepherds visiting the manger. They were clearly agitated but also in awe of this event. And behind them in the distance was the rest of the world, storm clouds gathering, the seas churned up, people walking along in fear and trembling. The sense of the painting is that something momentous has happened and life is about to be turned upside down.

We get so sentimental about Christmas that we miss the message. Will we claim the inheritance that will change our life and, indeed, the world around us? Or will we just sit by the fire and wonder about whether the message was real?

Christ is born. And so are we – to a new life in Him.
Claim your inheritance!

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those whom he favors! That's you!
And me!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Patricia Rome Robertson+
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