

Actors in the Christmas Play, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. C1051225
Titus 3:4-7 and Luke 2:1-14
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 25 December, 2005

By now, we all realize how much a part each of us has in the drama of Christmas. I realized it when I went out shopping for presents and ran up expenses. I had a part in getting our tree and decorations out of our storage room. I had a part as I prepared worship services. We all have parts that we play. We are actors in the Christmas play.

The actors in the original Christmas play were many and certainly interesting. All of them represent various kinds of people. Let's imagine a set with various actors playing parts. There's the angel who brought the news of a special birth to parents. He starts the play off with a golden horn and loud voice. Let God's proclamation be a part in the Christmas play.

The next actor is the emperor, Caesar Augustus. Representing people of power and government, he sent out a decree, setting into motion the journeys of many people, two of whom were Mary and Joseph. Let politicians and rulers be part of the Christmas play.

The young couple, Mary and Joseph, represent all young couples beginning their pilgrimage through life, expectant of a baby with all the joys and heartaches babies bring. They were poor, representing all the poor of the earth to whom the savior was born. Let parents be part of the Christmas play.

Let there be poor in the Christmas play. There was an innkeeper, not an evil man; he was just a business man. He did business on a first come, first served basis. Because of his business interests, history has even lost his name. If he had made room at the inn, we might know who he was. Let there be business people in the Christmas play.

There were shepherds out in the field. Not everyone had to be out working late at night like that, but these people, hard-up for work, had to do what was necessary. They were not different from employees who have to work different shifts or from hospital and emergency workers who must be available at all times. Let all workers have parts in the Christmas play.

There were wise men. They were the intelligentsia, watching the skies for astronomical signs. They were well educated. They were also men of wealth, shown by the kinds of gifts they brought on their journey. They represent people of different cultures. So, let the rich, the knowledgeable, and the people of different cultures be in the Christmas play.

If we read along a little further in Luke, we find another actor in the Christmas play, Simeon. He was an old man, and came to the temple every day to wait for God's salvation. He knew he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Finally, he did see him, and he said, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples."¹ Christmas isn't just for the young. Let there be old people in the Christmas play.

All these people gathered together in one spot around the manger. Oh! I almost forgot! There was a child who was born. Then, that's like our forgetfulness where we find it hard to let this baby into our lives. We often hear that Christ is left out of Christmas. Let Jesus be a part of the Christmas play. Because of him, all nations, peoples, and classes can be bound together into the whole play: All become God's people.

¹Luke 2:29-31

We all are actors in the Christmas play, but it is easy to lose the meaning of Christmas in all of our feverish activity. I am indebted to Albert Pennybacker, minister in my home church, for making me aware of a book by Bill Muehl entitled, *All the Damned Angels*.² The title comes from the report of a Christmas play. Let's listen to Muehl's account:

At last the teacher in charge announced that the manger scene would be presented by the (kindergarten) class. The houselights dimmed, the school janitor sneaked on stage with a box of straw, and a purple spot focused erratically about halfway between the pillars of the proscenium arch. "Then, from the wings came three virgin Marys who arranged themselves coyly around the creche and waved to their relatives in the audience. A vague uneasiness came over me. I feared for a moment that we were to witness the promulgation of a new dogma— group childbirth. But my wife, who is somewhat more sophisticated than I am in such matters, pointed out that the school had, over the course of the years, acquired three costumes for the virgin Mary. So, by strange logic which seems to govern pageants, there had to be three... (They) were closely followed by two Josephs who took up sullen postures near the box of straw.

Next came the angels, about twenty little girls dressed in diaphanous white gowns and sporting immense gauze wings. They deployed themselves with suspicious symmetry across the platform.

Then the shepherds appeared, an equal number of small boys dressed in burlap sacks and clutching an assortment of saplings which purported to be crooks. At this point, an unfortunate discovery came to light. In order to be sure that the angels and shepherds would strike a pleasant balanced array on the stage, the drama coach had made a series of chalkmarks on the floor. A circle for each angel and a cross for each shepherd. They were all to find and stand on the appropriate symbols. But unwisely this marking had been done when the pupils were wearing their ordinary clothes, shorts, skirts and overalls. When the angels came on in their flowing robes, each of them covered not only her own circle, but the adjacent cross as well. The shepherds, driven by God knows what demonic impulse to (absolute) obedience (to instructions,) began looking for their places. Angels were treated as they have never been treated before. And at last one little boy, who had suffered about all the nonsense he could handle, turned to the wings where the teacher in charge was going quietly mad, and announced angrily, "These damned angels are fouling up the whole show. They've hidden all the crosses." Needless to say, his mother and I were greatly embarrassed.

"The angels have hidden all the crosses." That is the danger we have to watch out for on this day of happiness and warmth: that all the angels of Christmas don't cover up the meaning of the cross. Angels like presents, family gatherings, tinsel, artificial or real trees, ham or turkey dinner all make the day rather delightful.

Christmas is the story of him who died on the cross for us, giving abundant life. It is the story of the birth of him who asked us to take up our crosses and follow him. I hope those crosses are not hidden. All of us are actors, not spectators in the Christmas play. We are drawn into the play by him who was born.

Let's let all the actors have parts. But the most important actors are not the shepherds, angels, or Mary or Joseph. Rather, the most important actors are you, I, and Jesus Christ. It is when we take up our crosses and begin acting, that the meaning of Christmas comes through: God with us: Emmanuel. We can know that the God who brought all this about is the God who acts, and who is with us in our acting. Merry Christmas!

²*All the Damned Angels* by William Muehl, © 1972, Philadelphia, the Pilgrim Press