

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2020
Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson
Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

GOSPEL READING: Luke 2:1-20

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

It is most certainly true that, when we picture the Christmas story, what comes to the forefront of our minds is the manger scene. Is there anything more precious than to picture a sleeping baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes as Mary and Joseph look lovingly down at him? It is, of course, the main focal point of our nativity sets, and the main symbol that the Church uses during this joyous season. There are also many of our favorite Christmas carols that are devoted to describing the beautiful manger scene with either joyous or lullaby like music.



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But as much as we like to dwell on what we perceive as the quiet and peaceful manger scene the truth of the matter is that Luke gives very little attention to what is happening at the manger. Of the 20 verses in Luke chapter 2, which describe the birth narrative, only 5 of those verses actually take place at the manger. And, of those 5 verses, Luke gives them very little detail. For example, Luke only briefly mentions Jesus' birth, dedicating only one verse (verse 7) to what we picture as the main event of all of Christmas! The whole entire reason we celebrate it!

It is true that, while most of us have our eyes focused on the manger scene, Luke's attention is focused elsewhere. For Luke, the true main event of the Christmas story takes place a few miles away from the manger in a grazing field where shepherds are looking after their sheep. It is here that Luke hopes the reader and hearer of his narrative pays the most attention, for it is at this grazing field that Luke believes the salvation of humanity truly begins.

As these unsuspecting shepherds are undertaking the difficult task of guarding and tending to their sheep, these ordinary and lowly shepherds who represent our broken humanity, an amazing thing happens. There appearing suddenly before them is an angel of the Lord while the glory of the Lord shone around them. It is in this moment that God removes the barrier between heaven and earth as they both come together.

Humanity was not used to being this close to God, after all, at this time in history the only place one expected God to potentially appear was in the holiest of holies room in the temple in Jerusalem, and only the temple high priest was allowed in there. So, because of this, it not surprising that the shepherds became afraid as they beheld this tremendous sight.

But those fears did not last as the angel of the Lord spoke to them. "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." It is in these words of the angel that the good news of Christ's birth becomes an active living thing in the world. These lowly shepherds are the first recipients of the good news.

As Lutherans, we firmly believe that the word of God is an active and living thing through the Holy Spirit. Our faith is freely given to us through the Gospel. We only come to know the Gospel through hearing the word of God. As the word of God is proclaimed to us the Holy Spirit penetrates our hearts as it begins to instill in us faith and trust in God's astonishing love through Jesus Christ. In other words, our faith does not become active until the word of God is spoken to us.

It is my belief that Luke focuses most of his storytelling in the scene with the shepherds and angels because it is in this moment that faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world becomes accessible to all



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of humanity. The shepherds are the first to be penetrated by the Holy Spirit as they listen to the good news of God's word; they are the first to receive the gift of faith.

But what also makes this scene in the grazing field so astounding is that, not only is this the place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ infiltrates the earth, but it is also the scene of the first Christian worship. After the angel of the Lord proclaims the good news to the shepherds a whole heavenly host of angels appears in the night's sky as they begin to sing what I deem to be the very first Christmas carol: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Echoing the good news of Christ's birth is this glorious hymn that "now the angels sing," which is just like the part of our worship where the gospel is proclaimed, the sermon interprets it for our daily lives, and then we sing the *Hymn of the Day* to help enforce the proclamation on our hearts.

And also like our worship, once we've received the good news, it becomes our joy to be sent out into the broken world in order to keep the word of God active as we proclaim the Gospel to others, so that they may share in the joy of Immanuel, God with us. Likewise, once the angels depart from the shepherds, the shepherds are so filled with joy that they make haste to go out into the world and share the good news. Sure, it is true that they go to the manger scene first and proclaim what they saw and heard to Mary and Joseph, but Luke tells us that "All who heard it were amazed..." I strongly believe that Mary and Joseph were not the only humans present at the manger. While Luke does not tell us, I firmly believe that there must have been at least a midwife present to help with delivering the child out of Mary's womb. Plus, who is to say that the innkeeper was not present there as well; it was his barn after all. Even so, I'm sure the shepherds would find others to tell, for it is an amazing story, and it is the good news!

In the scene of the heavenly host singing in the night's sky to the shepherds is the worship and praise of both heaven and earth; both heaven and earth celebrate the good news of Christ's birth. It is that moment in history, other than Good Friday, when God's kingdom is fully realized, where God and human become one flesh, forever binding us together so that nothing will ever separate us.

In the angelic hymn are the words that establish the new covenant between God and humanity. The "peace" referred to in the angelic hymn establishes a loving relationship. As God showers us with goodwill, it empowers us to spread goodwill to others in the broken world. This relationship is only possible through the birth of Christ.

As we again celebrate this holiest of nights in which we remember that God and human become one together, it is done so under the backdrop of a broken world, a world thirsting for relief from suffering. We still very much need the good news that angel of the Lord brings to our broken world. We need some hope to cling onto in these tumultuous times.



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While we marvel at Mary and Joseph becoming a family together with their newborn son, we remember our own families and the fact that we are unable to be physically present with them due to the pandemic. While we listen to the angels sing, we long for the time when we can be reunited, singing hymns together in-person, as we enjoy the sound of harmonious voices singing in chorus. As Mary faithfully ponders and cherishes the words of the shepherds, we weep and mourn for those who have lost their jobs, their businesses, their homes, and loved ones. We indeed need good news.

But this is why Luke points us back to that grazing field outside of Bethlehem where heaven and earth are joined together. It is a reminder that our worship this evening is for more than just singing our favorite Christmas carols. It is for the purpose of instilling us with the good news of Jesus' birth, so that our faith in God's promises may grow, but also so that we may be sent into the world to proclaim the Gospel.

We are now the shepherds of this time and place, and we need not be afraid to share the good news, for God is indeed with us. We are united in Christ to God and that means that not even death has the power to separate us from God. We no longer need to fear the evils of this world, for they cannot pry us away from God's love. We are free to trust in God's loving action of forever binding heaven and earth together, which means we have become heirs of God's kingdom. Through the birth of Christ, we have become God's beloved, for we are forever tied to Christ Jesus in baptism.

All of this empowers and frees us to continue to spread the Gospel to others so that it remains a living and active thing in our world. The more we share the good news of Christmas, the more opportunity the Holy Spirit has to reconcile the world back to God, so that the scene in the grazing field goes from one historical moment to our present and future reality. And, as that happens, all of humanity will join the heavenly host in singing: "Glory to God in the highest!"

Amen.

