

A SIMPLE, BEAUTIFUL STORY

The Nativity of Our Lord; Christmas Eve (Year B)

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Lessons

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

St. Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, you made this holy night shine
with the brightness of the true light.
Grant that here on earth we may walk
in the light of Jesus' presence
and in the last day wake to the brightness of his glory;
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,
now and forever. Amen.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

*the heart of our faith
Immanuel; God with us
with each one of us*

Sermon

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.¹ Amen.

What a beautiful night: the quiet; the lights; the decorations; the music; the message of Christ born among us; and you! We are so glad to have you with us for our Christmas Eve celebration — each of you. Whether you are a long-time member of Saint Peter, or a guest who has ventured into this building for the very first time, please know this: we are so grateful that you have chosen to spend this hour with us; to make room in your Christmas celebration for this time of worship; to gather together with us in story and song, in confession and praise, in prayer and solitude, in wonder and delight.

¹ Romans 1:7, 1st Corinthians 1:3, 2nd Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, Colossians 1:2, 1st Thessalonians 1:1, 2nd Thessalonians 1:2, Philemon 3; New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

I love that we're here together. You know; we live in a world that seems fascinated with divisions. Divisions based on whether we are rich or poor; liberal or conservative; old or young; women or men; dark skinned or light skinned; believer or non-believer. Divisions on whether we prefer low church or high church worship; literal or figurative Bible interpretations; hot food or mild; football or baseball; hybrids or SUVs; boxers or briefs (oops... I may have gone a step too far there). We deal with divisions all the time, but tonight we are one. One in the story that has called us here. One in the welcome we have each received from God. One in the grace and forgiveness that has been granted to us. One in the hope that is ours, through Christ.

And just think: all of this comes to us as a gift from God, and is contained in the simple, beautiful, moving story of a little baby born in Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago.

I have been struck, lately, about how reluctant we are to let it be so. It seems as though we live in a world where we want everything to be the biggest and the best. We want to be cheering for the winningest team. We want to work for the company that is expanding by leaps and bounds. We want our kids to be the first to walk and talk. (Actually I used to work with a youth staffer who liked to say that we spend the first two years of our kids' lives hoping they'll walk and talk, and the next eighteen years yelling at them to sit down and be quiet...) We want the biggest TV, the fastest car, the newest mobile phone. We want to benefit from the strongest economy and the mightiest nation. The biggest and the best: that's what people want.

And this is nothing new. We have even fallen to that temptation in the church. Think about the history of our movement. Let's build majestic cathedrals, that soar into the heavens, and take hundreds of years to complete. Let's install mammoth organs, that thunder above us as we sing hymns of praise. Let's feature live camels and donkeys in our nativity scenes. Let's have great processions, and elaborate liturgies, and distribute the Eucharist from jewel-studded tableware.

Even in the church, which should know better, we fall to the temptation of longing after the biggest and the best. Which is why the story that calls us here this evening seems to call us to a different place.

Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Messiah for whom God's people have been waiting, the one who will ascend to the heavens at the end of his life to be seated at the right hand of God — this majestic Christ is not born where we might have expected him to be born. His birthplace is not a palace, where he is surrounded by attendants and servants, there to meet his every possible want and need. He doesn't rest on a comfortable bed, covered with luxurious sheets and blankets. He isn't dressed in fine linens and lambskin slippers.

Instead, his birth takes place in the humble surroundings of a first-century rural stable, surrounded by grunting, steaming beasts, lying on a bed of straw in a crudely assembled feeding trough, attended by his parents but surrounded by strangers. It doesn't get much simpler than this. God doesn't look for the biggest,

best beginning the story of the Messiah could possibly have. This humble scene appears to be enough. Far from the center of society, far from the circles of power that hold sway in the first century, far from where anyone is expecting the Messiah to appear, as the hymn says, “the humble Christ was born.”

There is hardly a better example of this than the shepherds in this story. They have two dramatically different Christmas experiences. One is filled with glory. The other, as simple as can be.

When they are out in the fields, watching over their flock, all of a sudden an angel of the Lord stands before them. The glory of the Lord shines around them. It is a startling and overpowering experience. These men, tough and used to living outdoors, at first are terrified. However, once they receive the message of the angel, the shepherds look at one another and say, “Well, I guess we had better wander over to Bethlehem and see what all the fuss is about.” Their first Christmas experience, one of extraordinary glory, leads to the hunch that they ought to check this story out.

Their second Christmas experience is something completely different. They go to Bethlehem and find Mary and Joseph and the child. And it is after seeing Jesus, this tiny, helpless child in a feeding trough — about as simple a sight as they could see — quite the contrast from the heavenly ecstasy they had just witnessed — it is then that they leave, as St. Luke tells us, “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.” Their second Christmas experience, one of simple beauty and wonder, sends them out into the streets with shouts of joy.

Their first Christmas experience was the dramatic one — a mind-bending first-century light show. If a modern day movie production team was going to create an awe inspiring clip, this is the scene they would be drawn to depict. Can you imagine, with today’s technology, what that might be like?

It is their second Christmas experience that sends the shepherds out with a story to tell. In this tiny baby, they come to see the God of all creation living among us. God has come to become one of us; to know, first-hand, what life in this world is all about; to live, and love, and struggle, and hurt — to take on everything that has to do with human existence. And through his life, and death, and resurrection, and ascension, to draw us back to the God who created us, the God who sustains us, the God who loves us enough to die for us, the God who grants us promises that will last us for our entire lives and beyond.

The ancient writers called Jesus “Immanuel” — a Hebrew word that, translated into English, means “God with us.” This is why the Jesus story is a story with a remarkably simple beginning. This is what we’ve come here, tonight, to remember. This is what lies at the heart of this season. It is the story of how our majestic Creator God shows up right here where we are. God doesn’t reside atop Mount Olympus, or stay confined to some heavenly throne. Instead, God is found in the modest surroundings of a stable, out back behind a primitive inn. God is found in

the company of sojourners and stragglers and shepherds. God is found in the sorts of places where you and I often find ourselves.

It was true in the first century. It is just as true today. We find God today in the word that is broken open as God's people are assembled for worship. We find God today in the meal we'll share in a few minutes. We find God today in the community that is formed when brothers and sisters in faith surround each other with love. We find God today in the face of the stranger we serve. We find God today in the invitation we offer to a friend. We find God today in the care we express for one another.

Immanuel. God with us; for us; through us; day after day, in the simple, humble surroundings of our own lives. Every moment of every day an opportunity to catch a glimpse of the extraordinary becoming incarnate in the ordinary; the sacred becoming incarnate in the secular; beauty becoming incarnate in simplicity.

This Christmas, may the simple story of Christ's birth take hold of your hearts, and draw you into the story of God. May you find in this newborn baby a sign of God's deep love for you. May you, like the shepherds, walk away from this quiet gathering in awe of what God has done, glorifying and praising God for all that you have heard and seen.

This is the Christmas story. The one that begins in Bethlehem and ends in you. The one that bears Christ into our lives, and through us, into today's world. "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." May we do the same.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor

Gospel Lesson; English Text ²

^{2.1} In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph 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. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And 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. ⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of

² A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/Lectioary.

David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And 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!”

[¹⁵ When 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.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.] ³

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{2.1} Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐξῆλθεν δόγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος Αὐγούστου ἀπογράφεσθαι πάσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην. ² αὕτη ἀπογραφὴ πρώτη ἐγένετο ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου. ³ καὶ ἐπορεύοντο πάντες ἀπογράφεσθαι, ἕκαστος εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πόλιν. ⁴ Ἀνέβη δὲ καὶ Ἰωσήφ ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἐκ πόλεως Ναζαρέθ εἰς τὴν Ἰουδαίαν εἰς πόλιν Δαυὶδ ἣτις καλεῖται Βηθλέεμ, διὰ τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν ἐξ οἴκου καὶ πατριᾶς Δαυὶδ, ⁵ ἀπογράψασθαι σὺν Μαριὰμ τῇ ἐμνηστευμένῃ αὐτῷ, οὕσῃ ἐγκύω. ⁶ Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ ἐπληθύνθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ τεκεῖν αὐτήν, ⁷ καὶ ἔτεκεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς τὸν πρωτότοκον, καὶ ἐσπαργάνωσεν αὐτὸν καὶ ἀνέκλινεν αὐτὸν ἐν φάτνῃ, διότι οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ καταλύματι. ⁸ Καὶ ποιμένες ἦσαν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῇ αὐτῇ ἀγραυλοῦντες καὶ φυλάσσοντες φυλακὰς τῆς νυκτὸς ἐπὶ τὴν ποιμνὴν αὐτῶν. ⁹ καὶ ἄγγελος κυρίου ἐπέστη αὐτοῖς καὶ δόξα κυρίου περιέλαμψεν αὐτούς, καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον μέγαν. ¹⁰ καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ ἄγγελος μὴ φοβεῖσθε, ἰδοὺ γὰρ εὐαγγελίζομαι ὑμῖν χαρὰν μεγάλην ἣτις ἔσται παντὶ τῷ λαῷ, ¹¹ ὅτι ἐτέχθη ὑμῖν σήμερον σωτὴρ ὅς ἐστιν χριστὸς κύριος ἐν πόλει Δαυὶδ. ¹² καὶ τοῦτο ὑμῖν τὸ σημεῖον, εὐρήσετε βρέφος ἐσπαργανωμένον καὶ κείμενον ἐν φάτνῃ. ¹³ καὶ ἐξαίφνης ἐγένετο σὺν τῷ ἀγγέλῳ πλῆθος στρατιᾶς οὐρανοῦ αἰνοῦντων τὸν θεὸν καὶ λεγόντων ¹⁴ δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνῃ ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας.

[¹⁵ Καὶ ἐγένετο ὡς ἀπῆλθον ἀπ’ αὐτῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν οἱ ἄγγελοι, οἱ ποιμένες ἐλάλουν πρὸς ἀλλήλους διέλθωμεν δὴ ἕως Βηθλέεμ καὶ ἴδωμεν τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦτο τὸ γεγονός ὃ ὁ κύριος ἐγνώρισεν ἡμῖν. ¹⁶ καὶ ἦλθαν σπεύσαντες καὶ ἀνεύραν τὴν τε Μαριὰμ καὶ τὸν Ἰωσήφ καὶ τὸ βρέφος κείμενον ἐν τῇ φάτνῃ ¹⁷ ἰδόντες δὲ ἐγνώρισαν περὶ τοῦ ῥήματος τοῦ λαληθέντος αὐτοῖς περὶ τοῦ παιδίου τούτου. ¹⁸ καὶ πάντες οἱ ἀκούσαντες ἐθαύμασαν περὶ τῶν λαληθέντων ὑπὸ τῶν ποιμένων πρὸς αὐτούς ¹⁹ ἡ δὲ Μαριὰμ πάντα συνετήρει τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα συμβάλλουσα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς. ²⁰ καὶ ὑπέστρεψαν οἱ ποιμένες δοξάζοντες καὶ

³ St. Luke 2:1-14 [15-20], New Revised Standard Version Bible, op. cit.

αἰνοῦντες τὸν θεὸν ἐπὶ πάσιν οἷς ἤκουσαν καὶ εἶδον καθὼς ἐλαλήθη πρὸς αὐτούς.] ⁴

First Lesson; English Text:

^{9.2} The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. ³ You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴ For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶ For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. ⁵

Second Lesson; English Text:

^{2.11} For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ¹² training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, ¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. ¹⁴ He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. ⁶

Second Lesson; Greek Text:

^{2.11} Ἐπεφάνη γὰρ ἡ χάρις τοῦ θεοῦ σωτήριος πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις ¹²παιδεύουσα ἡμᾶς, ἵνα ἀρνησάμενοι τὴν ἀσέβειαν καὶ τὰς κοσμικὰς ἐπιθυμίας σωφρόνως καὶ δικαίως καὶ εὐσεβῶς ζήσωμεν ἐν τῷ νῦν αἰῶνι, ¹³προσδεχόμενοι τὴν μακαρίαν ἐλπίδα καὶ ἐπιφάνειαν τῆς δόξης τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ καὶ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ¹⁴ὃς ἔδωκεν ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν, ἵνα λυτρώσῃται ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἀνομίας καὶ καθάρσῃ ἑαυτῷ λαὸν περιούσιον, ζηλωτὴν καλῶν ἔργων. ⁷

⁴ St. Luke 2:1-14 [15-20], The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).

⁵ Isaiah 9:2-7, New Revised Standard Version Bible, op. cit.

⁶ Titus 2:11-14, New Revised Standard Version Bible, op. cit.

⁷ Titus 2:11-14, The Greek New Testament, op. cit.