

BORN TO DIE

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve Midnight

December 24, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel for Christmas Eve comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 2, verses 1 through 20. It is on page 724 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Luke 2, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. ² (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) ³ And all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem (because he was of the house and lineage of David), ⁵ to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ⁶ And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. ⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, "Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this shall be a sign unto you: You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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,
And on earth peace,
Good will toward men."

¹⁵ And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord has made known unto us." ¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Long ago there was a man in Israel by the name of Joseph. The Bible describes him as “a good and righteous man” (23:50). And he did a good thing. He put his good reputation—and perhaps even his life—on the line to do right by Jesus his Savior and also Mary, the mother of Jesus. This Joseph cared for Jesus at his most helpless hour. This Joseph held Jesus in his arms, wrapped him in cloths, and laid him in a place where no human had yet been laid.

Now, if you’re a careful Bible reader, you might be thinking, *Wait a minute. That wasn’t Joseph who did those things. Mary wrapped Jesus in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger.* And you would be right. Luke chapter 2 says that Mary “brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn” (2:7). That’s what it clearly says in Luke chapter 2. But I’m not talking about the Joseph in chapter 2. He was a good man too (Matt. 1:19), but I’m talking about the Joseph in chapter 23. And I’m not talking about the baby Jesus. I’m talking about the dead Jesus. So listen to this passage from Luke 23, and pay attention to how similar it sounds to Luke chapter 2:

⁵⁰ Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, ⁵¹ who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. ⁵² This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. (23:50-52)

And here’s the part that sounds a lot like chapter 2:

⁵³ Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. (23:53)

It sounds a lot like what Mary did at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly life. She carried him, wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him to rest in a manger. And at the end of Jesus’ life—or what seemed to be the end—Joseph of Arimathea carried Jesus, wrapped him in burial cloths, and laid him to rest in a tomb. It’s too similar to be a coincidence. Luke is a masterful storyteller, and he tells his story this way for a reason. He intentionally connects the birth and death of Christ our Lord.

Now you might be thinking, *Come on, pastor. It’s Christmas. Babies are so cute and cuddly. Can’t we just have one night where we don’t have to talk about death and suffering and blood and anguish?* The answer is, *No; we can’t. The Bible won’t let us.*

Luke writes his gospel in such a way that the birth and death of Jesus are connected. There’s this literary link between them.

“And she brought forth her firstborn son.”

“Then he took it down.”

“And wrapped him in swaddling clothes”

“And wrapped it in a linen shroud.”

“And laid him in a manger.”

“And laid him in a tomb cut in stone.”

“Because there was no room for them in the inn.”

“Where no one had ever yet been laid.”

Luke wants his readers to notice the parallelism. He wants us to know that the brutal and humiliating death of the Son of God and Son of Mary was God’s plan all along. This child, whose

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birth was both miraculous and ordinary at the same time, was born with one purpose. God came in the flesh in order to die. So as we consider together this beautiful and glorious account of Jesus' birth and the angelic visit to the shepherds, keep in mind the purpose for all this—for this child to grow up in order to be rejected, tortured, and killed, but also to rise again.

The first thing we notice about Luke's telling of the story is how historical it is. He tells us about Caesar Augustus, a census, and Cyrenius being governor of Syria. He gives us the historical details for why this particular Jewish couple made the journey from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. It kind of seems like information we don't really need to know, but Luke is writing a history of the life and ministry of Jesus. He's dealing with real events that happened to real people in real cities at a particular moment in history. So he tells us the when and where and how and why of God sneaking into our flesh through the womb of a virgin.

Then he tells us about Joseph and his family—how he was of the house and lineage of David. He explains the whole process that brought Joseph and Mary and the yet unborn Savior of the world to Bethlehem. And all these things worked together to fulfill the prophecy of Micah:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days (5:2).

It's the fulfillment of prophecy, and it's history. It's the real event of God appearing in human flesh.

Now we might expect this appearance of God to be a miraculous sight. If we weren't so familiar with the details of the stable or the cave—whichever it was that the young family was in—and if we hadn't seen so many images of mangers with a little baby in it, we would probably expect the king of heaven and earth to be born in a warm palace, wrapped in purple cloths to indicate his royalty, and laid golden bassinette.

But the story Luke tells has none of that. The actual birth of Jesus is remarkably ordinary. The miracle, really, is the virgin conception, nine months earlier, which we heard about this morning. That's when Mary got a visit from an angel. And that was when the Holy Spirit circumvented the way the world usually works in order to miraculously conceive the embryonic God in Mary's womb. That was the miracle. The rest of it took place the same way every other human birth occurs.

So Luke records the birth very simply: "And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn" (2:7). There's no hint of anything miraculous. There's no mention of a light brilliantly beaming from his Gerber® Baby face. There are no angels in the background softly singing "Away in a Manger," while the donkeys hum the bass line. It's just plain. So Jesus cried, just like every other baby. And Jesus filled his swaddling clothes with stinky stuff, because that's what babies do. God took on the same human nature you and I have. He felt the same pain and

shock that every other baby feels when they come out of the womb. He did not exercise his divine powers in order to avoid this traumatic experience. He didn't even use them to spare Mary the ordinary pain of child birth.

He was born the same way human babies are usually born. And he did this because he came to redeem ordinary human babies. Then he grew up the ordinary way, because he came to redeem ordinary children. And he did ordinary adult things, because he came to redeem ordinary adults. And when he was beaten and tortured, he died, because that's what happens to ordinary humans when they're strung up on a cross, and Jesus came to redeem ordinary humans.

Sure, he did some miraculous things—the sort of things ordinary people can't do. He had the ability to walk on water, but he usually took a boat. His human nature was exactly the same as yours and mine, with one exception: no sin. And that's all. He experienced all the same things we experience, and he suffered all the same things we suffer. He assumed full humanity, because he came to fully redeem humanity. And we see his complete humanity, even from the moment of his birth. So the scene in Bethlehem was incredibly ordinary. In the city of Bethlehem, all the people went about their regular business, with no idea what was really laying in that manger. The world continued on as normal, not knowing that God himself had come among them. Everything was very plain.

Except in one place. There was a field. And in this field there were some shepherds. They were watching their sheep. It was a very ordinary thing for shepherds to be doing. But then something extraordinary happened. And this extraordinary thing explained why the scene in Bethlehem was so ordinary.

The extraordinary thing that happened in the field was also terrifying. An angel of the Lord appeared to these shepherds. And notice, at first there's just one angel. The choir appeared after the first angel calmed the scene. You see, angels are terrifying creatures. This is the third time in *The Gospel According to Luke* that an angel has appeared to a human being, and all three times the angel has to tell the human being to not be afraid.

Now, we don't know exactly what this angel looked like. But the Bible describes some of the angels, and they don't look anything like Christmas tree ornaments. They look more like something you would see in a horror film. They have multiple sets of wings and eyes in weird places (Is. 6:2; Ezek. 1:6; 10:21; Rev. 4:8). It's easy to understand why people are afraid whenever they see them. But I don't think their shape is really the scary thing. In heaven, these angels behold the face of God (Matt. 18:10). And when they appear on earth, they reflect a glimpse of that awful glory. You remember what happened on the mountain when Moses saw a glimpse of God's glory. When he came down the people made him wear a veil over his face because there was light beaming from his face and they were afraid to even come near him (Ex. 34:30). Now if that happens when Moses sees a glimpse of God's glory, imagine the terror of these angels who continually see the fullness of God's awful glory. Without even having to speak a word, this reflection of the glory of God convinces every mortal sinner that we are lost and ruined.

So it's like the angels are trained to begin every conversation with the words, "Fear not," because God did not send this angel to pronounce his wrath upon us. God sent him to proclaim

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good news. “Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people” (2:10).

Notice those words, “all people.” The good news was not merely for the shepherds. The angel specifically says it is for *all* people. That includes you. When the angel preached to those shepherds, he was preaching to you. The sermon was for you.

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord” (2:11). This is your Savior. God came in the flesh for you. When you think about that death and suffering and blood and anguish, remember it was for you. When God took on human flesh, his purpose was the cross and his reason was you—in order that he might forgive your sin and cleanse you. These glad tidings are for you.

Then the angel gave the shepherds a sign: “You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (2:12). It’s kind of an odd sign. There’s nothing miraculous about it. The shepherds beheld glory when this angel appeared them in the field, and then it became even more glorious when a whole host of angels appeared in the sky praising God. It must have been overwhelming. But then they go to Bethlehem, and all they see is a baby lying in a manger. How ordinary. The only miraculous thing is that Jesus doesn’t shine with the glory of God. Apparently the baby Jesus can do something the angels can’t—he can keep it in. So these shepherds are able to look into the face of God without being consumed or terrified or even slightly alarmed. That is because the creator of heaven and earth became a creature in great humility. He came not to condemn, but to save.

So as you meditate on the birth of this child, who was conceived miraculously and born so ordinarily, remember what he was born to do. And know that he did this for you. His birth was for you. His death was for you. His resurrection was for you. All of this was done to save you. And this is why the angels rejoice. They glorify God because the Savior was born.

In Bethlehem—a humble child. In Jerusalem—a condemned criminal. In heaven—angels praising God and saying,

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace,
Good will toward men (2:14).

Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.