

GOD IS PLEASED

Luke 2:1-14

Christmas Eve/Day

December 24 & 25, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The Gospel lesson for Christmas Eve comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 2, verses 1 through 20. It is, in true Christian fashion, a remarkable display of shame and glory. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 2, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths 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,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told 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.

What does God think of us? What does he think of you? Is he pleased? Is he displeased? Is his disposition somewhere in between? Does it change from one day to the next depending on whether we've been naughty or nice? That's what you might call "Santa Claus Theology," where

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God rewards or punishes us on a sliding scale, depending on how naughty or nice we have been. And I don't think the real Saint Nicholas would have approved, because he was a Christian. What does God think of us? And how can we know?

Imagine you're just going about your regular business. You're doing whatever it is you do. Maybe you're cleaning the house. Maybe you're at work. Maybe you're at school. Maybe you're changing a diaper. Maybe you're just sitting on the couch. But at some random moment in your daily routine an angel of the Lord appears in bright glory. If you hadn't considered yet what God thinks of you, you do now. Angels bring messages from the Lord. So what sort of message does this angel bring? Is it one of peace? Is it one of judgment? Maybe it's a warning: "Get your act together or there will be judgment!"

This is what happens to the shepherds. They're just doing what they do. It's night time, and they're out in the field watching their sheep. "And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were filled with great fear" (2:9).

Of course, we all would fear. Occasionally, Scripture describes the appearance of angels, and they're described as rather terrifying creatures. They're not terrifying in an ugly or grotesque kind of way, but in a beautifully terrifying way. We don't know what all the angels look like, but some angels have up to six wings (Is. 6:2; Rev. 4:8). Some even have four different faces, each of a different kind of creature, so they can see in every direction at once (Ezek. 1:10; 10:14). God has created them beautifully, but their appearance would also be terrifying to us, because there is nothing else like them in all creation.

But the most terrifying thing about angels is who they work for. They are messengers for God almighty. So, at least sometimes, they are accompanied by the Glory of the Lord. Such is the case with this angel; "The glory of the Lord shone around [the shepherds]" (2:9). And angels come to relay a message from the Lord. That's what the word "angel" teaches us. The word literally means "messenger." So what might God have to say to us? What message will this angel relay to the shepherds?

The default reaction of a human is always to assume that an angel brings a message of judgment. That is because "we are by nature sinful and unclean, and ... we have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed." And, deep down, we all know it. You probably don't think of your sin every moment of every day. That would be a depressing way to live. Sins always fade into the background somehow. Sometimes that's because we hear the forgiving Word of Christ, and we take comfort in it. Other times we find a way to justify ourselves. But our sins always fade into the backs of our minds. But I guarantee you, if you saw an angel, accompanied by the glory of the Lord, your sins would come rushing back into your conscience, more powerfully than ever before. What have you done that would cause you to fear? This is why the first words out of an angel's mouth are usually something like, "Fear not."

So the shepherds feared a great fear. "And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord' " (2:10-11).

The angel announces the presence of his boss. Did you notice that? He announces the birth of "Christ the Lord." The title "Christ" means the same thing as the Old Testament title "Messiah." It means, "Anointed One." And the title "Lord" is the big one. This is how Greek translated the Old Testament name "Yahweh," which means, "I am." This is the personal name for the one true God in the Old Testament. This is the name above every other name (Phil. 2:9). So the angel announces that God himself has been born just over the hills in Bethlehem.

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This has the potential to be far more dangerous than the presence of an angel, even more dangerous than the entire army of angels that would soon appear. If an angel of the Lord is terrifying, who merely speaks a message from the Lord and merely reflects his glory, how much more should we fear God Almighty, who created the universe and reigns supreme over all things? This is the one who gave us all those commandments that we have broken. If all we know is that God has come in human flesh, we would be terrified, and rightly so. So God sends an angel, who is himself rather terrifying, to announce the gracious purpose for God coming in human flesh.

And the words of the angel are filled with peace. This is loaded speech. The angel doesn't waste words. It's packed with adjectives and superlatives. He says, "I have news for you." Wait, no. It's, "I bring you *good* news." But it's not just good news. It's good news of joy! Wait, that's not quite strong enough. It's, "Good news of *great* joy." And it's good news of great joy for rich people and good people and people who go to church every Sunday, right? Well, it is for them, but only because of what the angel really says. It's "good news of great joy that will be for *all* people."

Sometimes when we talk about how this is for all people, it starts to feel less personal, kind of like, "If everyone's special, then nobody's special." And I suppose this is why the Jews in Jesus' day and during the time of the apostles didn't really like the idea of Gentiles being included in their salvation. Christians can do this sometimes too. *Jesus is for us, and if those sinners, like the addicts, the adulterers, and people who don't use their blinkers at four-way stops, if those sinners want to have our Jesus, then they need to become like us first.* But that's not what the angel says. It's "good news of great joy for all people."

But since the "all people" thing can start to feel less personal, the angel continues, "For unto *you* is born this day ..." This is like when you're a kid, and your favorite uncle shows up for Christmas announcing, "I brought presents for everyone." He's your favorite uncle, but he's also everyone else's favorite uncle. But then he bends down to you and says, "This is for you." The child who was born is for *all* people ... and *each* person. That means, "For you." The proclamation to the shepherds is also *for you*.

And what will this child be, exactly? A Savior. This, of course, implies that we need saving. And we don't really like this idea very much. But if we had just seen a glorious angel, whose mere presence flooded our consciences with our deep, dark history, we would welcome such a Savior.

It may be for many of us that God's gift of a Savior comes before we even realize our need for a Savior. God often works this way with us, because, if the first thing we learn is the depravity of our sin, we would likely run away from God. That's what Adam and Eve did when they fell into sin.

One of the reasons we push our sins to the backs of our consciences is that we just can't believe God would forgive us. It strikes me as marvelous, and I hope you realize how marvelous this is too, that when God calls us to confess our sins, he tells us beforehand what the outcome will be. "If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). He promises this in order to remove the fear we have in confession. This is different from how confession works among human beings. In a court of law, you plead guilty in hopes of a lighter sentence, not to be forgiven. On a smaller scale, parents do the same thing with their children. They might say, "If you tell me the truth, I won't take away your hockey stick." But then they take away the puck. We do this among our fellow humans, because courts and parents still need to find a way to enact justice. And this is good. But God has

another way of enacting justice. And that's what this whole birth of a Savior is about. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Then the angel offers them a sign. And this is really profound. What sort of sign would you expect? On one level, the shepherds don't really need another sign to believe this. The angel's presence is enough of a sign. They don't need more proof. But suppose the angel wants to give them more proof. What would be a good sign? How about an entire army of angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest." They do get that, but that's not the sign. How about a miraculous star that descends and settles right above the manger? That's not their sign. How about a little halo above Jesus' head? What if they go into the stable and see the baby Jesus levitating over the manger? Maybe baby Jesus even talks to them. That would be a good sign. Or maybe the whole town of Bethlehem is already there worshipping him. He has a purple blanket and a little golden baby-sized crown. That would be a sign of glory. None of those are the sign.

Here's the sign: "You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (2:12). Now what kind of sign is that? Not only is there nothing miraculous about it, but it's kind of humiliating.

You know what a manger is, right? It's a feeding trough for animals. The manger kind of gets cutesied up for Christmas pageants, but it's really kind of humiliating. This would be like if you had a really big doggie dish, and you put a baby in it. And you know how doggie dishes get that scum ring on them that just never comes off. But the manger is actually worse, because it's not housebroken dogs who eat from it, but goats and sheep and donkeys. It's a donkey dish! That's where Mary places Jesus, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The word "inn," by the way, probably isn't the best translation. This isn't the same word used in the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the Samaritan puts up the wounded man in an inn (πανδοχείον). This word (κατάλυμα) means something more like a guest room. Bethlehem was a small town. They weren't big enough to have a real inn. There was no Super 8, no Motel 6, not even a Below Average 4. If you were a visitor in Bethlehem, you stayed with your extended family. So this isn't an innkeeper who says, "No," because all his rooms are booked up. If that's the case, you could just say that he's trying to run a fair business. Instead, this is Joseph's relatives who are unwilling to give up their bed for Joseph's pregnant teenage fiancée.

And why not? Maybe there are other relatives who came to be registered, and they just got there first. Eh. That doesn't get anyone off the hook. If that's the case, those relatives should give it up for her. We don't know everyone's excuse, but someone in Bethlehem should have given up their bed. However it all works out, it has to come back to Joseph's relatives thinking Mary is a sinner, and they don't want her or her bastard child in their bed. That's the shame that Mary, even though she was innocent—remember, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit—that's the shame Mary had to bear for this child.

And this is the sign the angel gives the shepherds. It was a sign of humiliation and shame. Because this child, though he was perfectly innocent and would continue to be innocent, would grow up to bear the shame of the entire world. The manger was a sign of a child born in utter sin (John 9:34), or so Bethlehem thought. And the cross was a sign of a man who lived in utter sin, or so the world thought.

So when the angel gives the sign of the manger to the shepherds, it's not the glorious sign we would expect. It is unique. I doubt there were other little boys sleeping in donkey dishes that night in Bethlehem. It doesn't seem appropriate to treat a human being that way. So the sign the

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angel gives the shepherds is not, “Find the baby being worshipped as God.” It’s, “Find the baby being treated as less than human.” That’s the sign the angel gives the shepherds.

Now, up until this point, there is only one angel. But as soon as this one angel gives the sign of humiliation, that’s when all the other angels come out. This is the moment where they can’t stay hidden or silent any longer. They hear, “Manger,” and they just have to praise God. The world sees humiliation. But the angels know the will of God, so they see salvation in the child born in shame. They see the shame of Christ the Lord as the height of all glory. At the word “manger,” the heavenly army comes out singing,

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (2:14).

God is pleased. God is pleased with you. It’s not because of anything you have done. It’s actually in spite of what you have done. He is pleased with you because his only Son, the eternal Son of God, by whom all things were made, was born in shame. More than that, he was born in shame in order to also die in shame. Our shame. Your shame. God has a better and more gracious way of enacting justice. He bears the condemnation in our place. It looks shameful, but it is really glorious, because this is how Jesus is our Savior. This is the theology of the cross. The world sees the shame of it. But we see the cross for what it is. It is the salvation of God for all who believe.

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (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.