

THE SMALLNESS

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 2, verses 1 through 20. 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.

Peace be with you. And God's peace is with you.

Why? Because God took on human flesh in the form of an infant. He came in peace, and he came to make peace.

The biblical concept of peace is bigger than we might think. We might think of peace as simply non-violence or a lack of hostility. In my house when I was growing up, peace meant that my brother, my sister, and I were not fighting. It didn't mean we liked each other at the moment,

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and it didn't mean we were kind to each other. It just meant that we were not actively hostile to each other at that particular moment. Peace was merely a lack of hostility. Or you look at wars around the world and conflicts within our own society. Peace in these circumstances would simply mean non-violence or a lack of hostility.

But God's definition of peace goes much deeper. The Hebrew word for peace (שָׁלוֹם, *shalom*) means "wholeness." It means that our spirits and our bodies are whole or complete. It means that we are living in harmony with God and with one another. It means we are united in one mind with the will of God and with one another. It means that we are united with the order God built into his creation. So when we say, "Peace be with you," it's not a throw-away line, it's not wishful thinking, and we're not just hoping that nothing bad happens to you. We are praying that your body and spirit would be whole and well. We are praying that you would be in agreement with God and his will. We are praying that, together, we would be united in one heart and mind with God.

This is not wishful thinking. The angels do not say, "We hope there is peace." They proclaim peace. God's peace is with you. God took on human flesh in the form of an infant. He came in peace, and he came to make peace.

This is the great miracle of Christmas. We call it the "incarnation of Jesus Christ." *Incarnation* is a fancy theological word, but it's worth it for Christians to know and use this word. There are some concepts that are big enough and special enough that they deserve their own special word. And this is certainly one of those things.

The central part of the word is "carne." That's a Latin word that means "flesh." You can hear it in the word "incarnation." It's similar to the Spanish word "carne," which means "meat," especially beef, because that is the best animal flesh. So "chili con carne" means "chili with meat." Or there are at least a couple restaurants in town that serve carne asada. That's grilled steak. Ask me later and I can give you my reviews of the dish.

So when we talk about the incarnation of Jesus, we mean his en-flesh-ment. The eternal Son of God took on human flesh. Nobody else has an incarnation. You and I do not have an incarnation. That is because, as long as we have existed, we have had flesh. We started out with flesh. We did not exist before our flesh was created, so we never took on flesh like the Son of God did. The miracle is that he existed before he had human flesh, but now he does.

Now there are two sides of this miracle, the big side and the small side. And to fully appreciate it, we need to recognize both the bigness and the smallness of this person who is Jesus Christ. He is the eternal Son of God. He possesses all the same power and divinity as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. And yet, for our sake, he became small, very small. And to fully appreciate this miracle, we need to recognize both the bigness and the smallness. Tomorrow morning we will focus on Christ's divine nature. That's the bigness. Tonight we focus on his human nature. That's the smallness. Together, they make the miracle of his incarnation.

The real miracle of the incarnation occurred approximately nine months earlier, when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would conceive and bear a son. And this would occur, not in the natural way, but supernaturally, by the power of the Holy Spirit (1:30, 35). And so the Virgin Mary conceived a child in her womb.

The birth of Jesus was not miraculous at all. The birth occurred the same natural way that billions of other children have been born. Now, the whole process by which a woman conceives a child, and grows a child, and gives birth to a child seems miraculous. It is the greatest thing a

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human being can do. And we often call it a miracle, even though it is the natural way that God designed for creatures in his world to procreate children. It's just so marvelous that it seems miraculous to us. And I think God designed it that way so that we would recognize that the creation of a new life is his work, not ours. Even though it occurs the same natural way over and over again, it's still so marvelous. And it seems like a miracle. But when we talk about the miracle of the incarnation, that's a miracle in the truest sense of the word.

A true miracle is an event that transcends the natural laws of the universe. If someone can suspend the natural order of the world and do something in a different way, without the mechanisms built into creation, or even against those natural mechanisms, that is a true miracle. It's when something happens that is truly and legitimately impossible.

I think it's kind of funny when Christians are mocked for believing in miracles, as if we don't know that these things are impossible. Of course we know that. It's why we call them "miracles." And we don't believe every supposed miracle. Some so-called miracles are hoaxes. But we believe the miracles recorded in Scripture, because they are supported by historical evidence. Numerous eyewitnesses testified to them, and they were recorded, just like any other historical event.

Now the virgin birth, or, really, we should say the "virgin conception," did not have a lot of eyewitnesses, because it's harder to have eyewitnesses for something not happening. But there were people with firsthand knowledge of it. We know the identities of three of them. First, Mary, of course. She saw and heard the angel Gabriel. And she knew her own history. She knew what she had done and what she had not done. Second, Joseph. An angel of the Lord also appeared to him to tell him what was going on. And third, Elizabeth, the relative of Mary. Immediately after the virgin conception, Mary travelled to Judea to visit Elizabeth, who was sixth-months-pregnant with John the Baptist. And when Mary greeted Elizabeth, John leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth knew, without Mary telling her, that she was with child, and this child is the Lord (Luke 1:39-45). Those are the three people we know by name who had firsthand knowledge of this miracle. And for most things, three witnesses is actually pretty good.

We can understand though, for such a miracle, if someone wants more evidence. The shepherds in the field gained firsthand knowledge of it when an angel of the Lord appeared to them. And the greatest evidence for the virgin conception is what this child grew up to be and do. He grew up and performed public miracles, many of them. There were hundreds of eyewitnesses. The most significant is his resurrection from the dead, which had over five hundred eyewitnesses (1 Cor. 15:6). When we see that, when we see what this child grew up to be and do, we look back at the report of his virgin conception, and we say, "Yeah, that checks out." So we're not talking about a fairy tale here. We're talking about a real, legitimate miracle. We're talking about the Holy Spirit transcending the ordinary laws of nature to conceive in the Virgin Mary the Son of God.

That's part of the smallness of the miracle. It's not just that God took on human flesh. And it's not just that the Son of God was once a newborn baby. But the Son of God took on human flesh at the smallest point of human existence: conception. There was a time when the eternal, infinite, and all-powerful Son of God was so small that only a microscope would be able to see him. And that single cell was God.

But it's not just in the size of Jesus that we see the smallness of the miracle. We also see it in the circumstances of his birth. He ends up in Bethlehem because his adoptive father, Joseph, is under authority. He's not a king, but instead has to pay taxes to a king. So he had to travel to Bethlehem in order to be registered for the census.

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And he has no bed, no crib, no bassinette. Mary “wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (2:7). Now, the word “inn” is probably a little bit misleading. Bethlehem was a small town and probably did not have a commercial inn, like a motel. More often, the word actually means to a guest room. If someone had a multi-room house back then, it would have a bedroom, or maybe a couple bedrooms, and one large multi-purpose room. That’s the room Luke is talking about here. It was probably your dining room and living room, but also a guestroom when your friends or relatives came to town. It’s the same word used later in Luke and also in the Gospel of Mark for the “guest room” where Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper (Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11). But at his birth, there was no place for them in the guestroom. Joseph’s relatives either could not or would not give them a place in their guestroom.

And this is much worse than the other picture we get, where there’s this nice innkeeper, who would like to give them a place, but he’s all booked up, so he lets them have the stable. In that scenario, it’s a stranger who wishes he could help, but he can’t. In the real scenario, it’s one of Joseph’s relatives who doesn’t give them space. And we don’t know anything about this guy. We don’t know what his deal was. In my opinion, and I’m pretty sure I’m right, this guy should have done something to make space for the pregnant lady. But, whatever the case, he didn’t, and it wasn’t really his call. It was God who orchestrated it this way. It was the Father in heaven who arranged for his eternal Son to be born outside and laid in a manger. A manger, by the way, is a feeding trough for animals. It’s like a big doggie dish, except it’s for donkeys and goats. God the Father arranged it this way in order to teach us the smallness, or the humility of Jesus Christ.

And this was a sign to the shepherds. I find this to be really marvelous. The angel said to the shepherds, “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. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger” (2:10-12). There’s a promise here. Or we could say it’s a proclamation of good news, because it’s not just a promise of something that will happen, but it’s the promise of something that has already happened. The promise is that a Savior has been born. Last Sunday we talked about what kind of Savior Jesus is. He is our Savior from our sins. And then the angel offers a sign of this to the shepherds.

Now this is really interesting. A sign is the proof of a promise. Later in Jesus’ life, people demanded signs from him as proof that he is really the Son of God (Matt. 12:38; 16:1; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16; John 2:18; 6:30). By “sign,” they meant some kind of miracle to prove his wild claims. And Jesus did many signs. But signs are not just raw miracles. They’re not just forensic proof to validate what Jesus or the angels say about him. But the signs reveal content about Jesus. They don’t just prove that he is the Son of God. And they don’t just prove that he is the Savior. Even more so, they demonstrate what kind of Savior he is. They reveal his personality.

The shepherds didn’t really need any more forensic proof that the Son of God had been born. There was an entire terrifying army of angels as forensic proof. But they needed to learn what kind of Savior had been born for them. And the sign of this Savior is “a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger.” Now what’s so miraculous about that? Nothing. He was despised and rejected by his own. He was poor. The only thing marvelous about this sign is how extremely un-marvelous it is. It’s something you don’t see every day, because it’s something that

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should never happen to any human child. But that's the sign. That is God's sign to the shepherds of who his Son is. It's a sign of who he will grow up to be and what he will grow up to do.

And that's the real smallness of it. It's not just that he was small in size, but to the world, he was small in value and small in importance. Jesus embraced this humility. From the foundation of the world, it was his plan and his Father's plan. So he grew up to be despised and rejected. He grew up to be crucified for the sins of the world. And this is how he is our Savior. This is how he saved his people from their sins.

So he has made peace between man and God. And that peace is not just a lack of hostility. It's not just that God is no longer angry over sin. But it's even more than that. He is pleased with man. He is pleased with those who trust in his Son, because Jesus made peace by the blood of his cross. And he gives his righteousness to you. God is pleased with this.

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

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