

# THE HUMBLE CHRIST

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2023

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.

<sup>1</sup> In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> And all went to be registered, each to his own town. <sup>4</sup> 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, <sup>5</sup> to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

<sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. <sup>17</sup> And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. <sup>18</sup> And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> 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.

---

Dear people dwelling in darkness,  
Upon you, light has dawned. The Savior of the world has come.

---

We live in a dark world. This is a land of deep darkness.

## THE HUMBLE CHRIST (Luke 2:1-20)

Perhaps you know this. I think most of you probably do. Optimism fades as we get older. When you're young, you have dreams of what you're going to be in life, and how great it's going to feel. You dream of a world where we finally establish peace. But we go from generation to generation, and there are still wars. They might be the same wars. They might be new wars. Or they might be old wars renewed. How dark the world has to be for one people—any people—to think that they should exterminate another. There is so much darkness out there.

But you may also experience that the darkness isn't just out there. It may be very near to you. You may experience it within yourself. It's in the things that have happened to you and the things you have done to others. We experience darkness with the people we have hurt, the people who have hurt us, and the people we have lost. We experience the disappointment of dreams that are never realized. And even if we are lucky enough get everything we dream of, it doesn't satisfy us the way we dreamed of. Because this world is still filled with darkness, and our hearts are still filled with darkness.

We dream of overcoming our sins and shortcomings. At some point in life, hopefully early on, we come to realize that we are just not that good; I mean, morally. And, perhaps, we resolve to be better. Or we might look at people in an older generation and think, *When I get older, I won't be so bad as I am now*. But you get there and realize that it's not true. We think that the sins of our youth will stay in our youth. They don't. They either remain with us, or they get replaced by other sins. Our nature remains.

There is darkness around us and darkness within us. I think most of you know this. But even then, we don't realize just how dark this world is. To a certain degree, we've gotten used to it, like how our eyes get used to the dark at night. Our hearts have gotten used to the darkness of this world. We know it's dark, but we don't even realize how dark it really is. We won't know that until the new world dawns, and we finally see Light in all his purity.

---

I had a weird experience when I was trying to write this sermon. Sometimes on Friday mornings, if I don't have my sermon finished yet, I'll go to coffee shop to finish it. And I pretty much commit to staying there until it's done. So I'm sitting there with my headphones in, listening to some mellow music, but it's drowned out by the house music. "It's the most wonderful time of the year." And I'm thinking, *No, it's not. It's dark. It's cold. And my mind is filled with all the people I know who are lonely, depressed, or sitting in a hospital room somewhere.*

I really don't like Christmas music. And I don't mean our hymns. Those are wonderful, because they're honest and true. But I mean the world's Christmas music. It's like the world tries to spread happiness by pretending to be happy. Fake it 'til you make it, right? So they fill the air with songs about happiness. But what if you're not happy? Then it just makes you feel like there's something wrong with you. And you know what? There is something wrong with you. There's a lot wrong with you. But the same things are wrong with all the people who are pretending to be happy. You can't dispel the darkness by pretending it's not there.

---

Into this darkness, the Light of the World has come.

It amazes me how gently and humbly the Light came. It's like he came under the cover of darkness. It's almost like a spy sneaking into the enemy's camp. Though he is the all-powerful king of the universe and the eternal Word, through whom everything was created, he appears in poverty, weakness, and humility. I say that it's *almost* like a spy sneaking in, because it's not just

## THE HUMBLE CHRIST (Luke 2:1-20)

a show. He doesn't just pretend to be those things. But he actually becomes those things for us. He truly became poor, weak, and humble for our sake.

It amazes me how many humble details there are in the Christmas story.

---

It starts with a decree from Caesar Augustus, so Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem to be counted in the census.

There were two basic reasons for a census. One was for taxation. If you're going to collect taxes from every person, you have to know who they are. The other reason was just for the vanity of the emperor. Like a scrooge counts his money, kings and emperors count their subjects.

The child to be born is the eternal and all-powerful Son of God. He is the rightful King of Heaven and Earth. But the circumstances of his birth seem to be dictated by the emperor of the Roman world. To the Caesar, Mary and Joseph are nobody, just a number in a census and a few measly denarii. He doesn't care anything about them. He'll probably never know anything about them. But they have to go on a journey at his whim. And this whim appears to be the reason Jesus is born in Bethlehem. We see, already, the humility of Jesus in that he was subject to some earthly king.

---

Then we see him laid in a manger. This might be the most obvious sign of humility. A manger is a feeding trough for animals. This is one of those things that we might see so often in Sunday school Christmas programs that we start to think it's cute. It's really not. Maybe this is something you do weeks later just for a picture ... if the manger is really clean or has never actually been used by animals. That might be cute. But nobody wants to put their newborn there for his first nap. And this wasn't something that was common in the ancient world either. This isn't one of those things where we say, "We're just more sanitary these days." That's part of it, but not much of it. Luke mentions it, because it's different. It wasn't normal. It's remarkably humble.

One of the old Church fathers, a guy by the name of Bede, described it this way, and I think this is such a great quote because it captures the humility of it and the reason for it. He said,

"He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities (Is 53:5). It should be carefully noted that the sign given of the saviour's birth is not a child enfolded in Tyrian purple, but one wrapped round with rough pieces of cloth; he is not to be found in an ornate golden bed, but in a manger. The meaning of this is that he did not merely take upon himself our lowly mortality, but for our sakes took upon himself the clothing of the poor. Though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich (cf. 2 Cor 8:9); though he was Lord of heaven, he became a poor man on earth, to teach those who lived on earth that by poverty of spirit they might win the kingdom of heaven."

You would think that the king of heaven and earth would be treated like a king on earth. If we were writing the script, that's how we would draw it up. But God did not. He put his Son in a poor manger.

Most English translations say that Mary laid him there "because there was no place for them in the inn" (2:7). A better translation is to call it a "guestroom." The word (*κατάλυμα*) doesn't really mean something like an inn or a motel like we would think of it today. Bethlehem probably didn't have anything like that. The only other places the Bible uses this word is when Jesus instructs his disciples to prepare the Passover for them in someone's guestroom (Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11). In those passages, it's also called the "upper room." That was where the Last

## THE HUMBLE CHRIST (Luke 2:1-20)

Supper occurred. In ancient Israel, if you had a house with multiple rooms, you would have sleeping rooms and then one large room for your family to gather. It's where you would cook, eat, and just hang out. And if you had guests from out of town, you would also use it as the guest room. That's what this word refers to. So it's not like some random innkeeper turned Joseph and Mary away. It was one of Joseph's relatives.

Why? Perhaps there were other relatives who came for the census. That seems possible. Maybe they got there first. But does that really matter? When there is a young woman in your family who is great with child, you give her a place. It doesn't matter who got there first. More likely, the reason they were given no place in the guest room is that Joseph's family thought Mary had conceived this child out of wedlock with some other man. That's how it looked to everyone who didn't know the truth about this child being conceived by the Holy Spirit. They just didn't want this adulterous woman or her illegitimate child in their house. They especially didn't want them in their bed.

So "she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger" (Luke 2:7). So where was the manger? We don't know. All we know is that it wasn't in the house. Most pictures have it in a stable. Some historians have suggested it was in a cave. It could have been either. Or it could have been neither. It could have just been a manger sitting next to the house. It was warm enough to be outside. We know that from the part about the shepherds. But it was still outside. Wherever the manger was, it was someplace with at least an open air entrance. The king of heaven and earth was born among animals.

It's very humble. And there's some foreshadowing in this. Actually, there's a lot of foreshadowing. There's a clever little literary thing that Luke does in his gospel. He foreshadows Jesus' death and burial. Compare Luke 2:7 with Luke 23:53 sometime. It's right at the end of the chapter about Jesus' death, where Joseph of Arimathea buries the body of Jesus. This is a different Joseph than Jesus' adoptive Father. There are four parallel phrases. At Jesus' birth, Luke says, "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." And after Jesus died, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. And Luke says, "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."

The Son of God took on human flesh. This meant that, though he has power over all things, he submitted himself to be dependent on others. At birth and at death, he needed someone else to care for him. Someone else had to carry him. Mary carried him in her womb. Joseph of Arimathea carried his corpse on his shoulders. Someone else had to wrap him in cloths. Mary wrapped him in birth cloths. Joseph wrapped him in death cloths. Someone else laid him down. Mary laid him in a manger. Joseph laid him in a tomb.

The foreshadowing reveals that this child was born to die. The cross was no accident. It was God's plan at the birth of Christ. It was even his plan at the foundation of the world. That's why his birth is so humble. He was born among animals, and he died among thieves.

---

Amidst all of the humility, there is one glorious sight. It's when the angels appear to the shepherds. This reveals the spiritual reality of what has happened in Bethlehem. The Light of the World came into a world of darkness. The light was veiled in the flesh of the child. But God gives a glimpse of that light out in the field. It was night time, so the shepherds were sitting there in darkness, eyes adjusted and pupils wide. First there's one angel. And the glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds.

## THE HUMBLE CHRIST (Luke 2:1-20)

The angel preaches to them. “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). That’s the point of all the humility. He is born to be a Savior. And he’s not just the Savior of some people, but he is for all people. He’s not just for the Jews, but for people of every nation. He’s not just for good people, but for sinners. He’s not just for the wealthy, but for the poor. The good news comes to working-class shepherds. All of this means that Jesus is the Savior for you. If this is good news for all people, that means it is good news for you. Jesus is your Savior from sin and death.

The angel gives them a sign. And this is so marvelous. Why would the shepherds need a sign? Isn’t this angel appearing in bright glory enough of a sign? In a moment, the whole sky will be filled with angels. Isn’t that proof enough that what they say is true? Of course. But the sign is for a different reason. The sign the angel gives doesn’t prove that the Christ has been born, so much as it reveals the humility of the Christ. Because this is the sign: “You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger” (2:12). What’s so great about that? It’s not miraculous. It’s not supernatural. It’s not extraordinary. It is not impressive in any positive way. The only remarkable thing is how poor and humble it is. But that’s the sign.

And at this word, all of heaven rejoices. That’s when all the other angels appear, saying,

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

It’s not random that this would be the moment when the unseen army of God appears in overwhelming glory. Heaven erupts in praise when the Savior appears in humility. The angels rejoice because they know that this is how God has come to save you.

---

Then the angels disappear, and it’s back to the darkness of night for the shepherds. But their hearts are filled with light. So they go with haste to Bethlehem, and they find it just as the angel proclaimed. They “found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger” (2:16). In the darkness of night, veiled in humility, the Light of the World has come.

---

We still live in darkness. There’s no denying it. Sin and death still torment us, just as they have for our entire history. But there is light. It remains veiled, just as it was veiled on that dark night.

But Christmas wasn’t even the darkest time for him. The light remained veiled, or at least mostly veiled, throughout the entire life and ministry of Jesus. And it was veiled in the thickest darkness when Jesus went to the cross. The whole point of the humility was to suffer and die for the sin of the world. On Good Friday the Light of the World descended into the deepest darkness. He went down into all the darkness that you, and I, and all the world has ever experienced. With all of our sin, and all of our sadness, and all of our shame, he went down into the darkness of death. And there, in the deepest darkness, the Light shines to bring us up from our world of darkness into the splendor of his eternal Kingdom. By descending into the darkness of death, he has made atonement for all your sin. He rose from the dead, and with that same power of life, he promises to raise you. So you are righteous in him, and you are worthy to live in his light when he appears again in glory.

We still live in a dark world, but we have been given a glimpse of the Light to know that the Light is real. And we long for the day when that Light will reappear in glorious splendor. Amen.

---

THE HUMBLE CHRIST (Luke 2:1-20)

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