

Sermon on Luke 2:1-20  
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2009  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace....  
Finally, it is time for us to slow down and stop, be still in the quiet darkness of this night, and listen for the voice of God. For it comes in the quiet hush of falling snow in the darkness, in the flickering light of a candle, in the songs of beloved carols sung by choir and congregation, in the spoken word of this familiar story read one more time on Christmas Eve, and in the silence that comes like a breath between our prayers. Welcome to this place of respite from that frenzied world outside, where many of us haven't stopped to breathe in the days and weeks of preparation for the Christmas holiday. So I invite you to stop, close your eyes if you must (without sleeping!), and listen for that still, quiet voice of God, who has drawn you here to draw strength and hope from the celebration of His Son's birth. And may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our collective hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Maker and our Redeemer.....

One of the great values of our worship together is how it is able to focus the thoughts and the prayers of any number of people on one point, one word, or one song – be it two or three who are gathered, a few dozen, several hundred, or thousands. Tonight you and I have come from many different places, from homes or from workplaces, with many and various experiences – good or bad, happy or sad – and we have been all gathered together by the Spirit of God to focus on one thing. That is the story of the birth of God's Son, which is the real reason for all the celebration that has been going on these past days and weeks (and will continue for another 12 days, God willing!).

This story is so familiar that it seems difficult to think of a new way to talk about it every year on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December! Preachers are always thinking of ways to make the story sound new and fresh, and some get pretty good at it – but I always struggle! How do you “improve” on a story so timeless and true, so simple, cherished and hopeful that the smallest child can tell it to you with all its elements and truth? Well, you can't! So why try? Yes, we can sing new songs to celebrate Jesus' birth, and maybe even introduce the story with witty anecdotes, but in the end, it all comes down to this: *we all want to hear the story one more time tonight, the way we first heard it, to remind us of the hope that we have drawn from the good news*

*that God has come down to us in the person of a vulnerable child, to bring us and the whole world peace.*

So what is it about this story that rings so true, and draws us to listen to it again and again over many lifetimes, without ever becoming bored with it? First of all, the setting is all too real. It was a world dominated by the great Empire of Rome, ruled by the all-powerful Emperor Augustus, who ordered a census taken of all the people who lived in this empire. But this story is not about an emperor and his edict: it's about a man and a woman who would never show up in any history book, Mary and Joseph, who obediently travel to their hometown of Bethlehem to be registered. The woman is pregnant, soon to deliver her child. When they get there, they find the town so crowded that there is no room for them anywhere to sleep, or for her to have her child. The only place was in a barn out back, behind an inn. This is the place where Mary had her child, and they even laid the child in the manger. Nothing really noteworthy has happened yet.

But then, suddenly, out in the hills above that town, where shepherds were watching their flocks of sheep, or goats, an angel of the Lord appeared and spoke to them about some great news that he had. *That very night, in the town below them, God had sent a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord!* Then the angel told them how to find this child, and a great number of angels appeared in the sky above them singing, *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace to all people.”* So the shepherds went into town and found the child as the angel had said, and told the child's parents what the angels had said. Everyone who heard them was amazed, and the child's mother pondered all these things in her heart, quietly. But the shepherds went back into the hills, praising God for all that they had seen that night....and for all we know, were never heard from again.

We can speculate about what the shepherds might have done or thought the next morning, or how it might have affected their lives. We know that the Church and faithful people throughout the world have made quite a lot out of this story. But that is not really the point. The point is *how does this story affect us?* How is your life and mine changed by this story, or more importantly, how are you and I changed by this child who grew up to become Jesus of Nazareth, Christ our Lord? What difference does it make to you and me that this child was born, and it happened in this way? (It must make quite a lot of difference, because we keep coming back to hear it again and again!)

One thing that draws us to the story is that it's about a simple, human family – like it could be any one of us! A mother, a father, a child. But not only that, they were without a place to stay, without a home to sleep in on

the night their child was born. So many families today can identify with their plight, as so many even in our own community are homeless tonight. But we draw hope from the fact that for this family their plight was not the end of the story, and their son became so much more than just a homeless child! This child born in a barn became the Savior of the whole world!

The other human characters who draw us into the story are the shepherds. Now, shepherds in those days were like the migrant workers of today. They worked hard for the little bit of pay they received – they probably didn't even own their flocks, working for someone else who did. They led a bleak existence, without much of a future. But *these were the ones to whom God sent an angel to first tell the news of Jesus' birth!* Not to Emperor Augustus, not to King Herod, not to the chief priests, the Pharisees or the scribes – but to *shepherds!*

I have always been amazed and impressed that God placed priority on being present with human beings who didn't seem to amount to much in the human scheme of things! God chose a young, teenaged girl to be the mother of God's only Son. Who would have thought such a thing?! God chose shepherds outside Bethlehem to first hear that good news! What's up with that???

So remember this when you and I think of all those people who don't seem to matter so much in this world, who don't have much, who suffer quite a lot – for it is in them that God places high priority and attention! (Probably because they are so much neglected and discarded by other human beings!) Think about Mary and Joseph and Jesus when you consider homeless families in our community. This past year we have hosted many families here at Redeemer in our church undercroft, through Project Home, when they have lost their housing and needed emergency shelter. We did this in the months of March and October, when we were asked. We could have been asked to host in December, which would put homeless families in our church basement tonight. *Because there is no room for them in the inn.* That gives our Christmas message tonight a whole new meaning, doesn't it?

And when you next hear about, or come in contact with immigrant workers in our community, why not think about the shepherds outside Bethlehem, who worked for the owners of their flocks? Many men, women, and children are here working and going to school, but living in fear of deportation or abuse because they don't have documentation. I remember the men who worked on replacing the slate roof on this church about eight years ago. All of them (except the foreman and the roofing company owners) spoke Spanish, and I'm thinking most of them were probably working without legal documents. I don't know, but just imagine. Some of our

church was built or repaired by immigrants.....or were they shepherds? Shepherds were the first to hear the good news of Jesus' birth, because God chose to tell them. Does God think of immigrants in the same way?

So as you and I listen to this wonderful, familiar story of Jesus' birth on this feast of Christmas, let's remember many families who do not have a place to sleep tonight, who are in a situation so much like Mary and Joseph were, with their little baby (without a health care plan). Let's also remember those who are so much like the shepherds, working for low pay, without much status, or protection. Let's remember, too, that the Holy Family soon became refugees, forced to flee their own country for safety in Egypt because of the threats of King Herod against their lives. Let's remember that God's attention and priority are always with the homeless, the immigrant and the refugee – just like they were with the Holy Family in the Christmas story we have just heard. How does knowing that emphasis in the story affect you this night, and how could it change you and me in the future?

For it is into THIS world in which we live that God has come tonight, once again with good news! For tonight is born to you, in your hearts, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And you will find him in a baby lying in a manger, in a homeless family searching for a home, in an immigrant looking for a new life, in your neighbor whom you see the face of Christ! Thanks be to God for a love such as this, that our Lord would come to us, into this world, once again – tonight!

And may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord! A blessed Christmas to you all! Amen.