

Sermon on Luke 2:1-20
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

After preaching sermons on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day for over 30 years, I always come to the prospect of preaching Christmas once more with fear and trembling. How does one make "new" such an ancient, beloved, and familiar story? How does one share the "surprise" of a story we all know by heart? You can't! So every time we return to the story in Luke, seeking the heart of the gospel on every Christmas, for you can't improve upon it, so why even try? But we tell it again in a different year, and hear it anew with different ears, and another year's set of experiences.

As a former history major in college, I am always drawn to how Luke tells the story with an historical context in mind, for the Son of God was born in a particular time and place. Not to quibble about the historical accuracy, because Luke didn't get it all exactly right. But exactness is not the point: rather, God sent a word of hope to the world in the person of a child born to parents who had no "importance", in a time and place where there were very important persons – emperors, kings, and governors – who were well known and in charge. But ironically, two nobodies: Mary and Joseph, unnamed shepherds and a child yet to be named, were the main characters, while the "famous folk" are barely mentioned.

All of us have heard the familiar story of Jesus' birth in particular times and places, giving us our own contexts for hearing God's good news of hope! Perhaps you first heard Luke's Christmas gospel from a parent, your mother or father, or on a grandparent's knee on Christmas Eve as a child. Perhaps you first heard the story in a Sunday School pageant or Christmas play, as you performed as one of the characters – a shepherd, Mary or Joseph, one of the three Magi, an angel or even an animal. Or you might have heard the story first in church, at a midnight mass on Christmas Eve (but I kind of doubt it – most of us have heard this story more than once before we venture out to church on a Christmas night).

Just two nights ago, I saw the *Charlie Brown Christmas Special* on television for at least the 50th time, having watched it for the first time in the mid 1960s when it first came out, and just missing a few years here and there. No, it wasn't the first time many of us heard the story from Luke, but it might have been the first time any of us ever saw or heard a cartoon character from a popular comic strip recite scripture on national television! After setting up the story of Charlie Brown and his "neighborhood gang of friends" in the context of white middle class American suburban culture, we see the frustration Charlie Brown felt at the commercialization of Christmas – which infected his family, his friends, and even

his dog, Snoopy. But then Charlie's friend Linus stops the show, with a poignant telling of the true meaning of Christmas, reciting the gospel of Luke word for word, while still holding on to his "luvee" blanket. *"In that region there were shepherds, abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them...and they were sore afraid. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold – I bring you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."*

Even at the age of 62, I still listen intently whenever Linus begins to speak, because you and I know these words by heart! And we still repeat them, year after year, decade after decade, generation after generation, seeking to focus our hope on the birth of the Christ child – who comes to all generations, to every people, as the greatest gift of God to the world.

At any event, you heard this story first at a certain age, living in a particular time or place – for us, most likely here in the United States, perhaps for the first time here in this church in St. Paul, Minnesota. And you return to this gospel, perhaps even in the same place or church setting, to hear it once again. Not because you don't know the story, and need to get a few facts straight, because you do know the story, and every detail is well-known to you and me. But we come back year after year to this gospel to focus our thinking on the center of our faith: that God comes into the world in surprising ways – like in the birth of a child in a little unknown town – to give hope, meaning and purpose to our lives. God brings light into our darkness, and joy to our saddest moments, and it all comes when we least expect it, as a great surprise to us!

So tonight we hear this story of Jesus' birth in our own time and place, on the 24th of December, 2016, in the 126th year of this congregation, Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, in a Minnesota city called St. Paul, in the 240th year of this United States, about 2,010 or so years since the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. In the final month of the reign of Barack Obama as President, and approaching the inauguration of Donald Trump, when Mark Dayton is governor of Minnesota, and four years before the next U.S. census, while civil wars rage in Syria and the South Sudan and millions of refugees have fled the Middle East and seek safety in European countries, when undocumented immigrants work without legal status in the United States and fear deportation, while some live lives of comfort and increasing wealth but others fear losing their jobs or their health care in the future. Young women and men look for work and homes to raise their families in safety and security, and people who speak different languages, come from different heritages or ethnicities, who follow different religions and hold differing values or political views, struggle to live together in unity and peace.

Into this world, in this time and place, God the Father, whom some of us long to also call Mother, our Creator, continues to send a Word of hope, promise and truth to each one of us who will listen. We hear this word tonight in the good news recorded long ago by an evangelist named Luke, a “messenger of the gospel”, who told of a young man and a young woman with a newborn child, who traveled a long way to register with the authorities according to the emperor’s whims, and found Bethlehem too crowded for lodging. There was “no room in the inn.” But when angel messengers appeared to shepherds in the hills outside of Bethlehem, they surprised them with the news that God was doing some new and great thing with this child who had just been born. They didn’t have to be afraid, they should go and see for themselves what God had done, in blessing this little child with a great gift of peace and reconciliation for the whole world. So the angels sang praises to God, and gave their blessing of peace to all people, for God has looked down with grace and favor upon us all.

As you and I hear this beloved story once again this night, I hope that it gives each of us focus and renewed faith for our lives today. Some of us have lost loved ones. Most of us have been living in great stress for many months, disturbed by the violence and danger around us, as well as by the strife and disagreement among the people of our own nation. The election campaign that has left many people afraid for their lives makes all of us uneasy about the future, and not just because of one man. Today we wonder what will hold us all together, and whether we can keep the peace among ourselves in such an environment.

But isn’t this the purpose of this gospel – to give us hope in challenging times, just as it did for faithful people who looked to God for hope in the first century? They found hope in the birth of a child named Jesus, who grew up to be a teacher, a prophet, a leader of the faith who gave his life so that all of us would live. Today we find inspiration and guidance in this story, which leads us today to consider the lives of many who are refugees, immigrants and wanderers, who are looking for safety and a place to call home. Following the guidance of Jesus, we can find compassion in ourselves, and generosity, to protect those who are seeking safety, and help them to recover from the chaos of poverty, violence or war.

If the story of Jesus’ birth teaches us anything at all, it is to think of those who suffer, whether in Aleppo or in St. Paul, and see in them the face of Jesus, or the holy family wandering in search of safety. The story reminds us that in the midst of the darkness and terror of our world, God comes to us with a message of peace and good will to all people. So with the angels we proclaim tonight the good news of God, who still comes to us in this child named Jesus. Do not fear! God is with you; God is will all of us, and promises to save us from ourselves! So go seek the Lord who has already come to you, and let Jesus surprise you in the face of your neighbor! Let us give glory to God, and make peace in our world. Amen.