

Luke 2.8-15
The Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord
Candlelight Lessons and Carols
24 December 2018, 7:00 p.m.
St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Gloria in excelsis deo +

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The words to which we this evening turn our attention are these from the Gospel according to St. Luke, "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. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth among those of His good pleasure!'"

Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.

The most important thing happening in Bethlehem that night certainly had nothing to do with migrants. It had nothing to do with a couple from Nazareth. Nothing to do with this girl, face, arms, legs dirty with dust, donkey sweat, and her sweat. Nothing to do with this foreigner who had the gall to show up 9 mos pregnant. Would her child be a citizen of Bethlehem, or would they get deported? And it certainly had nothing to do with the inconvenience and squalor that makes a border detention facility look like the Taj Mahal.

But no matter. The Baby must out. It's rough enough in a hospital with epidurals, a crowd of nurses, and a strange OB/Gyn peeking, poking, prodding. All exposed. Births like *that* go largely unnoticed. Just a two-line blurb in the Stormont-Vail section in the Friday paper.

How much more when the pregnant migrant's water breaks in a barn. When the only way to adjust her bed is by moving hay bales. When amniotic fluid and blood spills out on straw mixed with who knows what. When the unwelcome interloper mother—quite unprepared for *this* birth—unceremoniously plops her brood out in the filthy squalor of barn stall.

And then—icing on the cake—...the man she's with claims it's not even his. He's "just a friend." A do-gooder who couldn't say no to this helpless girl he'd foolishly asked to marry him.

Hardly the most important thing happening in Bethlehem that night.

No, instead, headlines were being made that night. Front-page stuff in every paper from the *The Ephesus Enquirer* to *The Massilia Gazette*, even *The Jerusalem Times*. The emperor—the *emperor!*—was gonna upset the status quo. And he wasn't gonna mess around. He was gonna take names only after he kicked some you know what. He issued decrees. People were being mobilized. And counted. Taxes were gonna go up—that's for sure. Either that or national debt. But the emperor, why, he was gonna...Make Rome Great Again.

But even with all that important stuff swirling in the political ether around them—important to Augustus, at least—the people of Bethlehem still found time that night for the things that really mattered to them.

There was a buck to be made—all these temporary migrants made it a seller's market. And so out came the wares—woven goods and wine; bread and bedding.

Rooms for rent. Mother-in-law suites for rent. Whole *houses* for rent!

There were parties to be had. People to see and places to go.

Bills to be paid. And bills to be collected.

There were stops to be made at Dollar General. And Dillon's. And Dillard's.

There were fevers to fight, bugs to remedy, medicines to administer. Dead to mourn. Children to scold. Babies to nurse. There were neighbors to be angry with, migrants to fear, strange dialects to loathe.

Important, every one of them.

And so the last thing—the very last thing—anyone that night would have accorded the honor of calling “important” was this squalid birth in a squalid stall. Among a people who had made the good gifts of God—government and homeland, goods and money, jobs and each other—into the *things of God*.

Which is to say they had made the good gifts of God into their...god. And thinking that all that other stuff was the things of God, they missed, right under their own nose, the *actual* things of God.

Fellow-redeemed:

Would you dare call important this squalid birth in squalid stall ... if there are people to be seen and places to be?

Would you dare call the preaching of God's Word important ... when the more important thing is emotional wounds that need to be healed?

Would you dare call the Son of God wrapped in the flesh of bread and wine important ... when there's a buck to be made, a fridge to fill, bills to pay? A death to mourn and a baby to feed? A goose to be cooked and a goose to be eaten? Whatever?

Take stock of your own heart. Know thyself. Know your sin. And claim it.

And then repent.

And turn to the *actual* things of God and turn your back on these would-be “things of God.” Put them away. Expel them from life and heart.

For what doesn't even deserve a sidelong glance—that's where all the Lord's attention is. This birth in Bethlehem.

What you call squalor the Lord calls the highest glory. This Babe laid in the manger.

What you call a waste of time the Lord calls your salvation. This Son of God who dwells with you in His Word.

And what you call unimportant the Lord calls your highest good. This Savior God who comes in water, bread, and wine. To you.

For isn't that just the point? And isn't that the great condescension of the Lord God? That in spite of all the mind-numbing, soul-slaying busy-ness of Bethlehem ... and of Topeka, Kansas ... and of all the stuff you call your life—that in spite of all that, still, He, for the sake of this Babe laid in a manger, takes pleasure in you?

Isn't that the point, that wherever the Lord brings His Word about the Babe laid in the manger—that wherever that happens, as it happened to the shepherd, He has shown infinite favor? Even to you?

And that through that announcement He declares to you that He would not have the death of the sinner, but that the sinner repent and live? And that to turn His righteous displeasure over your life—a life lived as if God did not matter and as if you mattered most—that to reverse it all so that you, the sinner, might not die, but live, He gave His only-begotten Son into *your* flesh. To suffer the depths of the squalor of the human condition—not for Himself, but for your sake. To come to you—to you—not in righteous wrath over sin committed, but in an eternal mercy and pity over your fallen condition? Isn't that the point?

Fellow-redeemed: that's the thrust and meaning of the song of the angels. And wherever that song is heard you can count on it: the Lord's good favor most assuredly rests upon you.

And all that message asks is that you take it to heart. The shepherds didn't shrug it off, as if such grace of God were something to be sneveled at. Instead, they were given to see what God has done in Christ as God Himself sees it. Not as trivial and unimportant, but as the highest glory and message of great joy.

And so they went to Bethlehem to see. That is, they had faith. They had trust.

And what they trusted was the message of the angels: This unnotable thing that had happened. This thing that didn't even get two lines in the Stormont-Vail column in the Friday paper. This thing that was so unimportant in the eyes of the world. Well, this thing wasn't unimportant to God.

For this thing was the birth of the very Son of God. *For them*. Just as it is for you. Because anyone who hears the word of the angel is the "you" in "bring you". The "you" in "for you." The "you" in "unto you." And the "us" in "unto us." A recipient of the blood-bought peace between God and men in the Man Christ Jesus and a person upon whom God's good pleasure rests.

And that's hardly unimportant.

Only, with Mary, treasure up all these things, and ponder them in your heart.

Amen.

pax domini, etc.

sdg
jsb