

Matthew 1.18-25

The Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord

Candlelight Divine Service

24 December 2018, 10:00 p.m.

St. John's Evangelical 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.

We draw our attention this most holy night to the Gospel lesson we just heard, and especially these words: "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

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

How do you say that the biggest thing that could ever happened has happened? And that what it means for you will change everything?

John builds in majestic, sweeping, poetical, philosophical language all the way from his mysterious, "In the beginning was the Word" to that Divine Word's enfleshment: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

That's what His birth means: we have seen God!

That's what His birth means: the new, eternal Temple of the God of Israel is the flesh of Jesus Christ, His Son!

Luke's account—in the Greek way—is all drama. The stuff of a Hollywood epic film. An epic film with an epic cast and epic action.

It takes us from peasants in the hill country of Judea. Pans to the other end of the known world to the emperor in Rome. And back again.

And it's a cast of thousands—Augustus. The whole town of Bethlehem. The holy family. Innumerable shepherds in the Judean hills. And all the holy angels.

An epic film filled with epic emotions—fear and joy, bewilderment and peace. Angels who burst into the night sky over shivering shepherds. Shepherds who leave everything...if only they can find the Baby. And having found Him, tell everyone they can about Him.

That's what His birth means: the most important thing that ever happened didn't happen in Rome...or Washington, D.C....but in a shed in a backwater town. Because that's where God chose to reveal His saving glory: in the humility of a barn stall.

So...compared to the both of them, Matthew seems, well, a little prosaic. A straightforward story. Just Joseph and Mary and Jesus. Oh, an angel, too. But nothing like the whole heavenly host that burst over the fields outside Bethlehem. And no shepherds recklessly abandoning their posts. Nothing exciting. The hint of a controversy, but easily ironed out. Leaving us with just a pious, young Jewish bride faithfully living with her wedded husband. Just a pious Jewish man living chastely with his wife. And just the birth of a Child. Maybe the only drama is knowing what we know but probably no one else there did—that Child wasn't his. Prosaic. Straightforward. Just the facts, ma'am.

So where's the signal here that this is a big deal? That the most important thing that could ever happen has happened?

Well, we just need to turn up our hearing aids, put on a different pair of glasses, and hear and read this Jewish text like a Jew.

But that requires a little patience. So tonight you're gonna not only hear a sermon—you're gonna learn a little something, too.

The words that are the Gospel lesson for tonight are the opening salvo of Matthew's Gospel. Yes, there's all the genealogical material that comes before, the "begats" and the "begottens." But that's just the backstory.

The real story starts now. And it starts with the words "Jesus Christ," as in "Jesus Christ's birth took place in this way."

Now look, if you're a Jewish writer, you can't just leave it like that. You gotta round out your story. Whoever's listening in needs to know when you've finished up what you want to say. And if you're a Jew you don't say, "That's my report" or, like we do today so often, "So...anway." Instead, you end with the same words you started with. As in "And he called His name Jesus."

"Jesus" to start. "Jesus" to end. Call it what you want. Bookends. A frame. Doesn't matter.

Because now that we have our frame we can come at it like a Jewish listener.

You know how every story has a cadence. The punchline of a joke always comes at the end. The climax of a story always comes *near* the end, but not at it. Because a good story teller adds a word or two about how it all worked out. The point is—since you know that you know where to look for the good stuff.

But a Jewish ear operates differently. The good stuff doesn't come at the end. It comes right in the middle.

In fact, that's how Matthew's whole Gospel operates. Between the two flagpoles of "Immanuel—God-with-us" at the start of his Gospel and "Lo! I am with you always,"—the last words of the Gospel—right there, dead in the center of the Gospel is Peter's confession: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" We moderns breeze right past it as just another event. As if the resurrection's the climax. But the heart and center and pulse of Matthew's Gospel is those words of Peter right in the middle: You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

So you see the form: marker at the start to say "This is the start;"; marker at the end to say "This is the end." And the meat and content right in the middle.

So now we've got our markers placed: The story of Christ's birth begins and ends with the name of Jesus.

But since we can't hear like a Jew we have to do some work. We have to start counting from the beginning *up* to the middle. And then we've got to count from the end *back* to the middle. And 80 words from the first Jesus and 80 words from the last Jesus is one word and one word alone: JESUS. Buried dead center in the sentence that takes up the dead middle of the story: "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from His sins."

And that, fellow-redeemed, is how Matthew tells us that the biggest thing that could ever happened has happened. And what the biggest thing that could have happened means.

So what does it mean?

It means that you, fellow-redeemed, your biggest problem isn't whether you forgot to set the alarm before you came to church tonight. Or whether everyone's gonna have a good time tomorrow. Or whether you've cleaned out your bank account to finance this Christmas.

Your biggest problem stares you in the face day in and day out. And it's so much a part of your life that you can't imagine life without it. It's the fact that your getting older and one step closer to death. It's the fact that you can do nothing about it. It's the fact that that's been brought on by your own fault, by your own most grievous fault. It's the fact that at your core and in spite of your Baptism into the new life in Christ you cannot help but sin. Your death certificate may say: "Cause of death: Old age," or "Cause of death: heart failure," or "Cause of death: blunt force trauma to the head."

But you all know what it really is. It's your sin. And it's killing you. For the wages of sin is death. Killing you. Slowly, maybe. Softly, maybe. Unnoticed, maybe. But for all that, inescapably, inexorably, irrevocably, and unavoidably. Right now. As sure as you can put your hand to your chest and feel your heart beat—so surely will it one day cease. Because you're a sinner.

So then, let me ask you: what in the world could be the biggest thing that could ever happen?

The only thing that *could* happen that would truly change the game is this: that some remedy be contrived and made to undo death and sin.

And you can't do it.

But God did. In the squirming flesh of this little infant. Laid on straw and hay. Wearing only-God-knows what kind of dirty rags for diapers. Handled by an inexperienced teen mother.

And named Jesus: YHWH saves.

You see, here, in Bethlehem, something huge and strange happens. Here God sets in motion this great reversal. This change of the entire course of human history—and yours—that rolls everything back:

The immortal God enters your dying flesh.

The holy God *bears your sin*.

The God to whom your very existence is an offense reconciles with *you*, the offending the party.

And the God whose scowl and death-sentence you hate has acted toward you, decisively and permanently, in a love that can be expressed by only one thing: His own death. That you might have life—eternal life.

That's what a Jewish ear hears. That's what Jewish glasses see. The heart and center of God's love toward you is this: that Jesus saves you from your sin. He offers His life for yours. Right here in the

manger. And in this one stroke of divine action He puts on His dear Son all that belongs to you—your death, hell, and sin. And He makes over to you all that belongs to His own dear Son—His life, His heaven, His holiness. It's yours. In Christ.

And that, fellow-redeemed, is how you say that the biggest thing that could ever happen has happened. At least Matthew's way: "You shall call His name JESUS, for He shall save His people from their sins."

And for *you* that has changed everything.

May you keep these words in true faith to life everlasting.

Amen.

pax domini, etc.

sdg
jsb