

Luke 2.1-20
Christmas Eve
24 December 2021
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.

It's all here once again. An emperor and an empire full of people, angels, shepherds, a young mother—a Virgin—a putative father, and at the center of it all, a Baby.

You can practically picture it all in your mind's eye.

It starts with the wide view. People from Spain to Arabia, from Britain to Egypt, on the move, returning "home," wherever "home" may have been, to be counted in the census.

Caesar August in the seat of power in Rome, his governor Quirinius busy in Syria managing the affairs of empire. A view of things so lofty that whatever was going on in Judea, in Bethlehem—well, totally off their radar.

There, the shepherds on the crunchy hillsides of the Judean countryside chilled by the dry night air of the desert. Their flocks gathered in from their grazing for protection in the dark. And then, first a lone angel, clothed in the glory that radiates from God alone, and then a multitude of them. Standing before the shepherds. Speaking to them. And singing to God.

And a few miles away, an exhausted mother. Her perhaps panicked husband. And both of them solicitously scurrying and fetching about for whatever it is their Baby needs. Swaddling cloths. A place to put Him down to sleep.

A manger will do!

You know it all very well. And praise God for that.

But this history?—it's unlike every other history. It's not a lesson you learn in school to pass a test. Nor is it a history that touches you in some tangential way, like the history of the Athenian democracy.

No. The history of this evening, it's entirely different. Listen to what the angel said, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

"Good news for ... *you*." "A Savior is born unto ... *you*." "Great joy for ... *all people*." The Athenians invented and ran and maintained their for themselves. They didn't do it for you.

But this history? Whatever happened here is just what the angel said: it's for you. Whatever happened here belongs not to the head. It begs not knowledge—there's no test to pass. It belongs to the heart; and it begs faith. Your faith. It begs you firmly to believe that Christ was born for no other reason than for you. You can't, after all, reasonably claim you are not part of "all people." In fact, it begs you firmly to believe that all of Christ, His holy birth, His holy life, His holy, innocent death, His glorious resurrection, His ascension into heaven—it begs you firmly to believe that every last bit of it was, and is, and will always be *for you*.

But that message, that “for you,” you can’t hear it, you can’t grasp it, but that it also brings you to the deepest crisis.

For if Christ’s birth must replace mine, then what of my birth? If Christ’s life must replace mine, then what of my life? If Christ’s death is holy and innocent and *for me*, then what kind of death must mine be? If it is Christ and not me who must rise from the dead, then what must become of me in my death apart from Christ? And if it is Christ who must for me ascend to heaven to live in eternity, what must my eternity apart from Him look like?

You see, if faith is to have any part of this Child lying in the manger, if it is to enjoy Him and have any benefit from Him, it must first entirely give up on itself. Not partly. Entirely. The birth of Christ must mean the death of you.

Because if the whole of Christ is *for you*, then there’s not part of you that can be retained. Not your ancestry; not your birth family; not your birth. Not your parents’ way of life; not your way of life. Neither personal triumphs nor personal defeat; neither wealth nor poverty; neither success nor failure; neither fortune nor suffering. Not your pride; not your shame. Not your pain; not your pleasure. Not your sins and certainly not your holiness. For Christ comes to replace all that you are, all that you have, with Himself. You must die.

That’s the crisis of this evening. That’s what “for you” means. It means your death.

But it also means your life. Or rather, it also means that Christ is made your life.

That’s the glory of this night. That’s why the angel declares, “Fear not!” Because Christ was born *for you*. That’s why the angel says, “I have good news for you.” Because the Son of God is wrapped in fallen Adam’s clothing and flesh. That’s what stirs the heavenly host to sing out, “Glory to God in the highest!”—that God lies in the humility of a manger to save sinners. That’s why they sing, “Peace on earth.” Because Christ is born, the Mediator between God and man. That’s what sends the shepherds running to Bethlehem, abandoning their flocks so carefully tended for the sacrifice in the Temple. For the last Lamb has been born, the Lamb of God, whose little heart pumps the blood that is your life.

And all of that?

That’s what Mary treasured up in her heart. For she who had died had given birth to Him who gives a new, everlasting birth. She fed Him from her body, whose flesh is true food, the very Bread of Life, that lasts into eternity. She swaddled Him whose righteousness covers all her shame and washed Him by whose blood she is cleansed from all unrighteousness.

And pondering all these things as she held this helpless Child in her arms weakened by labor she beheld Him who was her true Helper from heaven, whose right arm is strong to save.

For you. For you. And for you. For you, too!

Amen.

pax dei, etc.

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