

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

There’s something so ordinary in those words recorded for you and you hear every year at this time. The world remembers the angels, shepherds, the sights and sounds of the multitude singing and everyone coming to worship the baby Jesus. And this is all good and right. These things surrounding the birth of Jesus are important and proclaim the reality and glory that is Jesus born in Bethlehem. In those first verses of Luke 2, though, the birth of Jesus is recorded in such a matter-of-fact way. Here is a couple betrothed to be married and they are seeking to be righteous even in civil sense of adhering to the decree to be registered. It seems so dull and boring when you just take it at the situation which occurs.

Yet there’s great beauty in this account. First and foremost, it’s the word of God, the Holy Scriptures which are good, true, and beautiful. There is beauty also in this account because you see your Lord here in this humble situation and estate. The classical definition of beauty includes an arrangement of integral parts into a coherent whole, according to proportion, harmony, symmetry, and similar notions. Beauty is not something in the eye of the beholder, that’s false. Beauty is objective and transcendent. Here the Lord of hosts lay in a manger wrapped in swaddling cloths. To see the beauty of the nativity is to see this image of Jesus in the manger and see his purpose along with who he is and what he does. It’s beautiful because here God is in the manger come to save, to save you.

At Christmas you see God is in the manger. Here he is, a newborn, among the filth in a place where animals dwell and having no place to lay his head other than that vehicle used by animals to eat and drink. God is in the manger just as he had been in the womb of the virgin since his conception by the Holy Spirit. He is there just as he would be held in her arms and carried to Egypt as a king sent men to try to kill him. God is there just as later when he was visited by magi who fell down and worshiped him. He is there just as he grew up in the small, dinky town of Nazareth and then traveled around preaching, teaching, and healing. He is there just as he would stand before a Roman governor be condemned to death, was tortured, and suffered, and died among criminals. He is there just as he rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples. “God is man, man to deliver, and the Son now is one with our blood forever.” God is in the manger.

It’s the same God who did all these things because God is he who is “Emmanuel” God with us. That is who he is and what he does. To know God is to see Christ who is God in the flesh. To behold Jesus is to see the God who came down from his heavenly throne to fulfill God’s law perfectly, suffer God’s wrath against sin, and die to satisfy that righteous anger in your place and then rise from the dead for your justification. It’s not that complicated in terms of what the Scriptures reveal to you. Seeing God in the manger is to see the Savior of the world.

Christmas, then, isn't something to be treated lightly. As ordinary as this image is there is something extraordinary going on with great ramifications for your life. Your attitude is to be like the shepherds in the Christmas story who amid fear and trembling were comforted by God's word and went to where the Lord was to be found. They went to a place that was holy. Sitting in these pews tonight you also have come to a holy place. It's something different than the bleachers at a football game, the seats at a concert, or even as you rest in the living room of your home. God is in the manger and God is here now. Now granted, God is everywhere and fills all things, but he makes himself known through his word and sacraments. Having accomplished salvation he distributes or gives it to you through the means of grace. This very instant you are encountering the living God as you hear his word read and preached to you. Where is God? He's no longer in the manger, he's right here and in your midst.

So, what's your response to this? Is this a thing of comfort or a thing to be feared? The answer is "yes." The first response of the proclamation of Christmas you see in the shepherds. "And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 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.'"

These shepherds were minding their own business until the angel of the Lord appeared to them and it scared the living daylights out of them. They were told to pay attention to what had happened and then where the Lord was to be found. The fear you are to have is to see God for who he is and what he says. In your sin, you walk in darkness and grope through this world. You want to be told, "it's ok" and affirmed in who you are and what you think. You are tempted to buy into the lies of the world, the devil, and your own fallen flesh that want absolutely nothing more than to silence God or form a god that can be molded and shaped into your image. You want a god we don't have to fear and one whose presence can just be like a friend cheering you on the sidelines.

God is in the manger, and he is the same God who is here now and who says in Hebrews, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

The God, who is in the manger, is the same God who will take vengeance on those who have rejected him and will make them a footstool for his feet. There's no amount of deflecting, denying, or changing this fact. Christmas is where this reality is seen that God has come down to earth and he has come down among sinners. This baby who is God in the manger is the one who will come again to judge the living and dead, who will judge you. Normally a baby isn't one to

be feared but this baby is the one who has the authority to cast you into hell. Fear God who calls you to a new life that is not formed according to the patterns of this world but instead trains you, “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” God is in the manger, and he is here now so listen to him. The beginning of Jesus’s ministry in the Gospels Jesus started off by saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” God’s Kingdom has come, and it is here even as he will come again on the Last Day and all flesh have been raised to be with either the devil and his demons or with God and his saints in glory.

On this night you see God is in the manger, God is here, and this is a thing of comfort for you. That then begins to shape, form, and define Christmas. It’s real, fleshy, and tangible. It’s not abstract but very much a part of who you are as people. It’s far greater than some sentiment. God is in the manger, and he tells you tonight that he was there for you. God took on human flesh in order that he could die and atone for your sin, and he has done just that. Jesus is the Lord who is far greater than anyone can image or try to turn Christmas into however nice it may appear. God didn’t become an angel, or some spirit that floats around; no, God became man. He is like you in every way yet without sin. This is God’s grace and mercy. As Christians you find comfort that God is in the manger, and he is here now because to behold Jesus in faith is to see him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It’s to take to heart his preaching and believe his words of law and cling to the words of the gospel as your only hope. In repentance and faith, you hear the words of the angel and rejoice, “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.”

As the infant Jesus lay his head resting that first night, he was born so that the day would come when his head would bow not in the manger of Bethlehem but in death as he hung on a cross at Golgotha. But know this and take it all to heart, that was for you. Christ coming into the world for you was so that you would be redeemed by his blood. He, the perfect sacrifice is the Lamb of God who has taken your sin upon himself paying in full what you rightly deserve and giving you in exchange his righteousness, glory, and life. That’s mind boggling but it’s true. God rightly condemns you in your sin and his judgment against it, that it deserves death and everlasting is hell is right and true. Yet, here is Jesus, this baby, who came into the world to save it, to save you. The same person Mary held in her arms and nursed from her own body is the same one she would see hanging naked, dead, and lifeless on a cross. Ask Mary what’s the cost of sin and she could tell you, she knew. Look at Christ dear saints of God and see your redemption, your salvation in the baby born to Mary and behold him through the lens of the cross as you see where he would go all out of love for you.

Your attitude toward this is like that of the shepherds after they heard this message. They give you an example of what the Christian faith looks like and how it’s lived. It wasn’t let’s run away or let’s keep tending our flocks because we’re feeding and clothing Bethlehem with these sheep so this is more important than going to where Jesus is found. No, it was something else. “When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all

who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.” That right there is what, the Christian life looks like. It hears God’s word and says, “Amen Lord! I will go where you say and find you where you are to be found because you are the Savior who is Christ the Lord! And from this I will confess who you are before all the world.”

God is at work even now as he is here. Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The heavens have opened as Jesus was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and then born into this world darkened by sin. God dwells in the depths because he has rescued you from sin, death, and the devil. Your life has been redeemed by Christ. Be like the shepherds. Keep running to where your Lord is found in humble settings and follow as he guides you through his word. For the grace of God has appeared. The fullness of time has come. The day has been won. God is in the manger, glory to God in the highest.

See life in this all. Life amid death as by his death he has destroyed death and by his resurrection from the dead you stand righteous and holy before the throne of God. That’s Jesus, the baby born in Bethlehem so long ago yet born “for you.” You see then the significance of this all. If it were just mere history there would be no point in being here tonight or tomorrow, there would be no point to church at Christmas or anytime, you could find ways on your own to remember with fondness this nice story. But if this really is for you and God really delivers it all to you, then the example of the shepherds teaches you what your faith does. Follow their example. Go to where Jesus is found. Go running to where his word is proclaimed, and his gifts of baptism and his own body and blood are given out to and for you. Go where Jesus is and he forgives your sin giving you life and salvation.

It’s Christmas dear saints of God. What a wonderful thing this is to gather here tonight. The Christmas story is for you. Treasure these words as Mary would treasure all these things in her heart. Rejoice and give thanks that the Lord has come. Light has scattered the darkness. The quiet night bursts open with sound of salvation, your salvation, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

God is where he wants to be. God is in the manger, and this is beautiful. He’s here for you just as he lay in the dirty manger he was where he wanted to be and as he slept soundly as a babe, he was on his heroic course for you. For unto a child is born, unto you a Son is given. You are his and he is yours “Glory to God in the Highest” now and forever.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.