

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Nativity of our Lord - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

12/24/2017

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and

they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

[15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.]

The Gospel of our Lord.

### **Prayer**

Let us pray,

Amen.

### **Christmas Eve**

So... It's Christmas Eve! One of the two most heavily attended services of the entire church year! Christian places of worship across the world are filled to the brim with people who have come to hear the story of the birth of Christ... candles in hand and dressed in their winter best...

And yet... something is amiss...

For some, it's the fact that they don't really even care about the church. Maybe they're only there to please some other family member, but the service is just another waste of time.

Others are distracted... the stress that was put on them by work right before the holiday has pushed them literally to the breaking point... and now they have to put on a face and smile to everyone around them, pretending like nothing is wrong...

Some are just worn out, the kids are home for the break, the bills have been expensive this year and they aren't sure if they'll be able to dig themselves out of the credit hole they've dug trying to make the holidays a "special" time for their family. All the pressure that society has put on them to make sure that Christmas is a "special" time has exhausted them, and to make matters worse, they can't seem to get their kids to even behave for the service!

Others are filled with grief... They lost a loved one around the holidays, and the pain around this time of year is so great that they can barely hold it together. Oh, they act like nothing is wrong, they tell everyone that they're fine, but deep down that's a lie. They're so angry they can't even see it, how could God do this to them?

Finally, some of them are trying their hardest to get something out of the message, some glimmer of hope from the Christmas story... but they can't help but feel like they've heard it a million different times! How many Christmas sermons have been preached in the past two thousands years?! Millions? Billions? And yet this guy in the pulpit thinks he can shake them out of their holiday lethargy.

The reality of Christmas is that it often seems dull in comparisons with the pictures of the perfectly lit Christmas towns, snow covered hills and frozen ponds. Very little can stand up to the worlds that Thomas Kinkade can dream up, and it leaves us feeling like we've failed. Dr. Culpepper, the dean of The School of Theology at Mercer University writes: *"Familiar as it is, the Christmas scene often seems to be little more than a fairy tale, a wonderful story that provides a brief escape from the real world we face each day."*<sup>1</sup>

That's why I love the story in today's text. The Gospel of Luke is my favorite of the four gospels and the beauty of it shines in its simplicity. Take a look at the story again, the actual birth narrative takes place in only 7 verses. The angelic visitors don't even present themselves to Mary and Joseph! They hear the story second hand! In a world and season that loves to romanticize everything, we're given a no-frills story that paints the picture just the way we would really see it!

So, please try for a minute to forget the many times you have heard the story of the birth of Christ and let me tell you about a young girl named Mary, her betrothed Joseph, and the soon-to-be baby boy Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup>Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VIII*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. pp. 50

The writer of the Gospel of Luke makes it clear that nothing about this would allow one to call it a fairy tale. The Gospel writer places the birth of Jesus in a historical event: during a Roman decree, while Quirinius was governor of Syria, in a town called Bethlehem, in a country that was currently under foreign occupation. The power of the empire was flexing its muscles, forcing the known world to bend under its will.

The journey would have taken several days. Making things even more inconvenient was the fact that Mary was about to pop! I remember taking a two hour car ride with my sister when she was pregnant, can you imagine WALKING 100 miles?! Ladies who have carried a child, I'm sure you can sympathize with the poor girl here.

It's clear that they don't seem to have much in terms of money. We often call the place they stayed an "inn" but that language calls to mind something nicer than what they probably used. The building would have been a sort of common travel stop, where those without money could stay together safely. Some even suggest a cave. Regardless of the accommodations, when the birth was finally over the boy was wrapped tightly in bands of cloth. It was a common practice at the time to help keep the infants limb's straight. The only available spot for the little guy was the manger, a sort of feeding trough for the animals. And so it was that the savior of the entire universe was placed in rags and set in the feeding trough.

But the story wasn't over. An angel appears to some shepherds. Now, we have a much different picture of shepherds than others did two thousand years ago. They were the lowest of the social ladder. You couldn't trust them, and they always grazed their flock on your land! They were a little backwards...

But suddenly an angel appears announcing "*I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.*" What we don't realize is that the writer is being tricky here. This was a greeting that always accompanied the announcement of a new emperor, and it was usually delivered first to important people in important places. But the angels announce it first to some crazy shepherds! It seems that we're smacked out of our fairy tale world to take a good long hard look at the world in front of us!

I mean, do you really want to live in that fairy tale world? Because it seems to me that when we retreat to those places, looking for God in perfect paintings and wonderful frescos we end up feeling the many things I described at the beginning of this sermon. When we look at the picture honestly, when we see the story for what it truly is... we realize that the story doesn't need embellishing!

Take a look! See for yourself! While we were all busy looking around for God in the fancy places, God was busy being born to two poor middle-eastern peasants. Stop and let that sink in for a minute... God, the creator of the whole universe... the same God who was so powerful that it only required mere words for the chaos to be tamed, the same God who the Israelites in the desert were so afraid of that they didn't even want to see this God's face! THAT GOD! decided to be born. To enter into all our pain and suffering. To enter the world as one of us... the scandal! The all-powerful creator of everything was forced to communicate with only grunts and screams. His name was Jesus, he was a baby once, and he came to save the entire world... Now that's a story... Amen.