

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Nativity of Our Lord - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14]

Luke 2:1-14[15-20]

12/24/2022

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

1In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph 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. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And 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. 8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And 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!” [15When 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.” 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The 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

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Light and Darkness

Good evening! Well... here we are... Everyone’s favorite service of the year. The one where families come together to worship together, sometimes flying or driving long distances to see their loved ones. It’s a time of joy, a time of celebration, and a time of peace.... Or so I’ve been told. I have had different things on my mind this year... specifically darkness. Sounds strange, right? But for a lot of people, this has been an especially tough year. We have lost loved ones, suffered pain in other ways, and lamented the other changes and losses in our lives. But I’m also talking about another darkness, actual darkness. Have you ever wondered why Christmas is at this time of year? It’s not because Jesus was born in December. From what we can gather, it seems likely that he was born sometime in the spring. But

the early church moved it so that it coincided with another well known celebration... the winter solstice.

Now, if you're a fan of conspiracy theories or books like *The Da Vinci Code*, you'll think this was some great big secret that the early church hid from the rest of the world, but the truth is much more boring. The vast majority of people didn't care or didn't know. But, getting back to the winter solstice... It's a holiday celebrated the whole world over, in religions and cultural groups for thousands of years. The winter solstice, which was December 21 this year, marks the time when we are tilted away from the sun, giving us the longest night and the shortest period of daylight.

So, for time immemorial, something about the darkness has frightened us, enough so that we celebrate the moment we begin to enter into a period of more light. Think about it, most of us were afraid of the dark when we were younger, and some of us still are. The dark is a spooky place, full of unknowable mysteries and monsters. It's easy to take it for granted nowadays. Our artificial lights are so powerful that a new term, light pollution, was created to classify the way it overcrowds the sky. Most roads are marked by street lamps, and in places like Hampton, one can only see the brightest of stars. Such is our commitment to stopping the darkness.

And so the church moved the celebration of the birth of Jesus to the winter solstice, a time when we look forward to the sun in our sky and the son that has been born in a manger. It becomes a sign of hope in the darkness, something to shine and guide our path into the future. As the darkness grows shorter, we are given a physical reminder of spiritual truth, that God has been born among us.

But remember, I've been thinking about darkness. You see, I've finally internalized the truth that my mind has already known but didn't fully understand... that God is the God of both the light and the darkness...

When it comes to sermons, particularly ones like Christmas Eve, where everyone has heard the story time and time again, I try to narrow in on one particular point, letting whatever has been sitting on my soul guide me where God is leading. It brought me to a point I think we often overlook regarding our Gospel story. Remember, most of the Christmas plays you took part of in your childhood were an amalgamation of both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. When we look closer, particularly at tonight's text, we notice that the story is actually pretty simple. And when you put yourself in the perspective of the Holy Family, it's almost mundane. Mary and Joseph are forced to travel to Bethlehem for some stupid census, just as she was ready to give birth. When they finally arrive all the rooms are sold out, a reality that comes just as Mary goes into labor. Maybe the innkeeper rushed them into a storage room, no need to bother the rest of the guests. The birth goes well, and it isn't until the mother and child are recovering after that they hear about the fantastic appearance that the shepherds witness. Even then, the story is second hand. Mary and Joseph only hear about it after. The reality is that they are pawns in a machine that eats up and spits out the poor and lowly. The Roman Empire is just the most recent in a long string of systems that oppress.

Which brings us to the shepherds... why do the angels come to them? In our modern context we look at shepherds with a sense of the romantic. But in the first century, these were the lowest of the low. If you wanted a group to bear witness to the birth of a king, you didn't want the testimony of some shepherds. Think of them as backwater hillbillies from the hills

over in West Virginia... One scholar writes that “*shepherding was a despised occupation at the time... in the first century, shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flocks on others’ lands.*”¹ And yet the heavenly host appears to them... Why?

Another scholar helps us find our answer. In commenting on the lack of embellishment in comparison to the fantastical nature of the birth account for John the Baptist, they write: “*Luke has kept the story clean of any decoration that would remove it from the lowly, the poor, and the marginal of the earth. In the history of the church there have been many so poor and abandoned as to be able to identify with this scene.*”²

When times are good we often gather around the manger to stand in awe of the miraculous events. But in our darkness, it's the reality that God is present throughout all our ups and downs that makes the story so powerful. As I said, God is the God of darkness and light. Jesus comes to a family who suffer in many of the same ways so many have suffered before. His birth is announced not by the rich and famous, but by the mundane and everyday. God comes to us at all stages of our lives, the good, the bad, and everything in between. And I don't know about you, but that sure sounds like good news of great joy to me. Amen.

¹ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 8. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 49.

² Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 35.