

Christmas Eve 2022
St. Luke 2:1-20
Christmas With the Shepherds

A few years ago in Kyoto, Japan, a prominent department store created a window display featuring a Santa Claus nailed to a cross. Now, these merchants were not attempting to be sacrilegious, nor trying to “make a statement.” In fact, they were not even trying to be offensive, at all. In Japan, where less than 1% of the population is Christian, Christmas is nevertheless celebrated as a time of gift-giving. The merchants knew that Christmas had something to do with a man who came and died on a cross. And, so it was in their marketing of the season, they put together a display that combined a small grain of history, with a rather large dose of fantasy.

Dear Friends in Christ, we may get a chuckle over the way those Japanese retailers were confused over the meaning of Christmas, but that confusion is not limited to Japan. Tonight, as we worship on Christmas Eve, I ask you this: What makes Christmas, “Christmas?”

I ask you that, because in our own land, our children can no longer sing Christmas carols in what was once known as a "Christmas concert" in our public schools. And, we are constantly reminded that it is politically incorrect to wish people a "Merry Christmas"; the correct greeting is now "happy holidays." Perhaps most troubling of all, a recent survey revealed that 44% of those who proclaimed to be Christians believe that the most important aspect of Christmas is not the celebration of Jesus' birth, but time spent with family.

I think it is fair to say that our culture celebrates Christmas in much the same way as those confused Japanese business owners -- a strange combination of history and fantasy. How different is the Christmas we hear of in those timeless words from St. Luke's Gospel. There is no confusion,

no fantasy, about what makes Christmas “Christmas” as Luke narrates for us the things which took place when Caesar Augustus ordered that a census should be taken, “that all the world should be registered”.

On this Christmas Eve, let us turn our hearts and minds to that first Christmas. There is so much to ponder on the night of our Lord’s birth, but we will focus this evening on those first celebrants of Christmas, the shepherds, and from them learn what makes Christmas “Christmas”.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul writes,

"But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence" (I Cor. 1:27-29).

These words of Paul help us understand why it is that God announced the birth of His Son to shepherds, “Keeping watch over their flock by night”.

The news of the birth of the Good Shepherd is not delivered to the royalty assembled in Caesar's court or to the high priest in Jerusalem's temple, but to shepherds. Today, we have somewhat of a “romantic” view of shepherds. But, in the days of the New Testament, if you daughter came home and announced she was marrying a shepherd, the first thing you would do and sit down and cry. You see, shepherds were seen as rough characters, viewed with suspicion and often with such contempt, that they were looked on by society as little better than cut-throats and robbers. Consider this for a minute -- it was these such men who were the first to receive the good news of Christmas.

And it was in a totally unexpected way that they received that good news. As this band of shepherds attended to the needs of their sheep,

they were visited by an angel and were covered by the Lord's own glory. Surrounded by the bright presence of the holy God, the shepherds "were greatly afraid," says Luke. They were terrified, for what sinner can stand in the presence of God and live? Like Moses, who was confronted by God's presence in the burning bush as he tended his father-in-law's sheep, these shepherds are in the presence of the Almighty God. But, God has not come to destroy them; rather the messenger of the Lord says,

"Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord".

"Do not be afraid" says the angel. Those are words of sweetest Gospel to the shepherds and **to you**. This good and glad news is not for the shepherds alone, but for all people. Do not be afraid for there is born to you "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord". The Prophet Isaiah had announced "To us a child is born, to us a son is given" (Is 9:6). Now, that promise is fulfilled. A child is born. A son is given. Not just any child. Not just any son. But the Son of God, "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord". The Son of God who will go to the cross to save us from the death and condemnation which we deserve. The Son of God who will take our sin and give us His righteousness. The Son of God who will die our death and give us His life.

The angel says that this Son "is born to you". He is born to be your Savior. He will give to you when you most need to be given to -- when you are oppressed with guilt and pressed down by your past. When you are afraid of life and when you are afraid of death. He "is born to you". He is given to you to be your Brother and Savior. What Luther says of the Sacrament in the Small Catechism is true of the Christmas Gospel "for the words for you require all hearts to believe."

And the shepherds **did** believe the words of the angel. They took to heart the angel's sermon: "And this will be a sign to you: You will find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger". They heard and believed that heavenly hymn which pierced the stillness of the Judean night: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men". They believed God's Word as it had been preached to them by an angel and they went to the place where Christ was present in His flesh.

The shepherds did not reason that they could just as easily worship God out on the prairies under the open sky. They went to Bethlehem to find God where He had put Himself for them and for us. They went to kneel at the manger bed of a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths for that baby is God-in-human-flesh. From the shepherds, we learn to worship God where He puts Himself for us. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther spoke of the Holy Scriptures as the manger which contains Christ. God has put Himself **in His words**. When we come to hear the preaching of God's Word and when we come to receive His body and blood in His Supper, we are coming to Bethlehem. For our incarnate Savior is here just as truly as He was lying in that manger in Bethlehem. We need not make a pilgrimage back to Bethlehem. Instead we have our Christmas here around pulpit and altar as Christ enters and dwells in our hearts by faith.

But, also note this: The shepherds did not stay in Bethlehem. Simply and starkly, Luke reports that "when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child". The shepherds returned to their shepherding "glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen as it was told them". That is the way of faith. Faith speaks of the Christ who has been preached to us. Faith speaks of what God has done for us and for our salvation in the

manger of Christmas and on the cross of Calvary. Faith glorifies and praises God for what He has given. And He has given us His only begotten Son, Christ the Lord. From the shepherds, we learn what makes Christmas "Christmas".

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