

Sermon – December 24, 2020  
“A Father’s Words”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Luke 2:1-20

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen*

It is a bit of a stormy evening isn't it. Looks like you are making good progress on finishing that chair. Your skill is developing well. That is a very good job you have done; that chair will last for many years. I think it is time I told you a story. It is a story that I have waited a long time to tell, but I believe the time has arrived. It was on this night of the month years ago that you were born. I need to tell you that story. You need to be aware of what happened that night. Where should I start? I think if I start at the very beginning, then what you need to know will be more apparent.

Your mother and I were living here in Nazareth. We were engaged, and I was working hard to finish up a house for us to move into and to complete several carpentry jobs I had taken to help make some extra money for our start as a married couple. People in Nazareth were very generous, and I had a lot of extra work that needed to be completed, so I was very busy. I was coming back from gathering wood in the hills one day when I heard the news. Many of the men were gathered in the square and were talking in excited voices about another declaration from Rome. The emperor of Rome, Augustus, had made a decree calling for all of the people of the world to be registered. It was another tax collection from Rome to fund their programs, and the amount was pretty small compared to other taxes they collected, so the amount for many was not an issue. What had gotten the attention of the men and caused the discussion was that in order to pay the tax, each person had to go to his tribal home and register in that city. That meant that many of those who were living in Nazareth would need to go to their original homes in other villages. It meant that I would need to go to the City of David, Bethlehem, to register. For me, that would mean a journey of about 100 miles. Five days of walking twenty miles a day would get me there, and I could probably stay with family once I got there while I waited for the

registration. One of the Romans I had done some work for mentioned that Herod was building a new fortress close to Bethlehem, so I could probably get work there if I needed to make money. Then I remembered Mary. She was carrying you in her womb and there were not many days before the time for birth would arrive. Traveling to Bethlehem would be very difficult for her. It would take longer to get there. The twenty miles a day I would normally walk would be reduced to ten or less, so we would need more provisions for the journey and a longer time to get to Bethlehem. But we had no choice but to go, and I would need some time to complete enough jobs to have the money for the trip. Most of those who were frustrated and talking loudly in the square only had journeys of a few miles to one of the surrounding towns. A few of us had long trips to plan for. Mary's and mine would be one of the longer trips.

I took the news to your mother and we talked about our options. She did not want to be left in Nazareth and was confident that the journey would be something she could handle. I was very uncertain about her walking that distance in her condition. She also understood that she might need to deliver you on the journey, so she planned to carry what she would need to care for you. She seemed determined or maybe drawn by God to make the trip. It was as if she needed to go along. So, we decided to finish our preparations as soon as we could and get started on our trip to Bethlehem. Unfortunately, it took me longer than I thought to finish up all of the projects I had agreed to complete, but those who had hired me were kind and generous with their payments and we had enough money to allow us to buy food for our journey. I made arrangements for the house to be cared for while we were gone, got everything ready for travel, and we left Nazareth behind and headed to Bethlehem.

I know you have made the trip to Jerusalem with us each year when we go to celebrate Passover, so you know how hard the walk can be. On those trips, we have the safety of a large crowd who watch out for each other. On this journey, we were often alone, as we could only walk so fast, and it made the risk much higher. As we got closer to Jerusalem, we were able to travel with larger groups and that helped some, although most of the people moved much faster than we could. The trip went well and there is nothing to share from that part of the journey. Thinking back, it seems to me as if we had the blessing of God over us on our journey. Mary did not complain at all, although I know it was a challenging trip for her. I could tell that the walk was difficult for her, but she did her best to move as quickly as possible, and after many days and nights on the road, sleeping in the open and dealing with the weather, we arrived in Bethlehem.

You have not been there since you were born, but it is a small town like Nazareth, just a few miles from Jerusalem. When we arrived, we quickly discovered that others in the line of David had the same idea we had of staying in the homes of family while they waited to register. My delay in leaving, the longer trip, and our slow progress meant that we were among the last to arrive, and the houses of our family were full. People were welcoming, but there was just no room left where we could stay. Finally, one of the patriarchs of a family offered to let us stay in the stable among the animals. It would have to do. At least we would not be in the open, and I could work to make a place for us to rest and wait. I cleaned out a stall close to the main door and filled it with a lot of fresh cut dry grass from the fields around the town. We settled in to wait for our time to register. It had been a long walk and I was tired and I knew Mary was near exhaustion as well. It seems like I had hardly lain down that first night when Mary woke me up. She was in pain. No, she was in labor and we were in a stable. I was not sure what to do, but Mary knew. She was prepared and ready for your birth. Like the women of the Hebrews in Egypt who gave birth without the Egyptian midwives, so Mary gave birth to you without help. I stood guard over the stable and helped her however I could. And then you were born. Such an amazing moment. You were with us in that quiet place among the animals in the stillness of the night with the stars of God keeping watch overhead outside. Mary cleaned you up, cared for you, and then wrapped you in bands of cloth that she had brought with her. She then placed you in the manger that I had filled with more of the fresh dried grass from the field. It was not a well-built crib for a baby like you have learned to make, but just a feed trough, a manger filled with hay. Mary loved you very much. I could see it in the way she cared for you. I loved you very much too. I had never experienced love like that. Not even to this day has it faded. Mary was exhausted as were you, and you both slept. I left the little oil lamp burning to give some light in the stable in case Mary needed to see to care for you. I was tired as well, but stayed awake in the door of the stable for a while to breathe the night air, look at the stars, and to keep watch over the two of you.

For a while the only noises I heard were from the animals in the stable as they dozed and ate. That is when I heard them coming. You could tell they were searching for something. They were not trying to be quiet even though the town of Bethlehem was asleep. There was a large number of men coming up the main street of Bethlehem. As they came to a house, one of them would leave the group to go to a stable, look inside, and then yell, “No not here,” or “Try the

next one.” They kept going from house to house, slowly getting closer, and I moved closer to you and Mary to get between them and the two of you. Then one of them came running in and saw me, Mary, and you in the manger and he just stopped and stood there, frozen for a minute as if he could not believe what he was seeing. By his dress, I could tell he was a shepherd and a poor one at that. Then he turned and quietly spoke out into the night to the others, “It is this one. They are here just like we were told. Come quietly.” And then the stable filled with shepherds. They could tell I was uncertain of their intent. One of them who had the biggest, most joyful smile I think I have ever seen said, “Shalom, brother, we mean you no harm.” They all just kept looking at you in the manger. Some of them were kneeling, others were standing on tiptoes looking over others to see. Each was just gazing at you as if they could not believe what they saw, and all of their faces were filled with such joy, I don’t think I have ever been in a place where there was such joy and reverence from such humble people. Finally, they began to speak. They tried to be quiet, but they were so excited and their words woke Mary. They spoke words that I will never forget, words that you need to hear, words you need to know, words that change everything. They wanted us to know why they had come to find you and how they knew where to look. They told us they had been out in the fields watching their sheep just as they watched them every night. And suddenly an angel of the Lord stood before them and all around them shone the light of the glory of the Lord. They were all terrified and fell to the ground in fear and trembling, fearing that they were about to die. Never had they seen an angel and this one was magnificent. They were frozen and unable to move, hardly breathing with fear, and then the angel spoke to them, telling them to not be afraid. And when they heard those words, they were released from their fear and filled with a peace that they had never known, and they were each able to look up at the angel and hear what was spoken. The angel said he brought to them good news and not harm. The news was not just for them, but for all people, news of great joy. The angel said that today, this day, in Bethlehem, the city of David, was born a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord! When they heard these words, they were overcome with joy! And then the angel gave them a sign to verify that his words were true. If they would go to Bethlehem and look in a stable, they would find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in one of the mangers. And when the angel told them this sign, he did not leave, but was joined by a heavenly host that was praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” The praise from the heavenly host went on for some time, and

then slowly the praise and the host faded away as they all returned to heaven, and then the shepherds were alone again in the field. But now they were filled with joy of this news that the Messiah, the Lord, had been born. They had been in the presence of God's messenger and witnessed the praise of the host of heaven. They slowly got up from the ground and looked at each other, trying to grasp what had just happened.

One of them voiced it first, saying to the others that they must go and find this sign the angel had given them and see the baby, the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. They all began to agree and then to move towards Bethlehem. Then they ran as fast as they could across the dark fields and road, filled with joy and excitement, down out of the hills and into the town. They began to search each manger, running from one stable to the next until they found us and saw the sign that the angel had given to them. That sign was you wrapped in bands of cloths lying in a manger. They knew the mangers of Bethlehem well, as they fed sheep in them often. No one had ever put a baby in one. They had seen many babies in Bethlehem, but never one wrapped in bands of cloth. Mary let each of them look at you. She didn't say much, just seemed to reflect deeply on the words about you that they shared from the angel. They stayed for a long time, almost until first light. And then they begin to leave the stable. Each of them seemed to have someone come to their mind whom they needed to go to and share the good news they had heard. Their joy was so great that it seemed to be breaking out as they left. They were not as quiet as they had been with us when they came into the stable. They just kept glorifying and praising God for what they had heard and seen and what good news had been told to them. For a long time, I could hear them all over Bethlehem, knocking on doors and sharing the good news of the arrival of the Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Mary didn't say anything about what they said then, but kept their words in her heart, pondering what their words might mean for you.

We both think about all that has happened these many years. Mary has other things that she will share with you in time, things that she and I think about and wonder about. Yes, your skills are very good and you can provide for yourself and others with the work of your hands. But I think that God has other plans for you. Plans that I do not understand and cannot guide you into, plans that God will lead you to fulfill. It was on this night years ago that you were born and the shepherds came and brought us the words of the angel. Mary and I have cared for you, loved you, taught you all that we could, but now I think the time has come for you to know the words that were spoken to the shepherds by the angel. You are to be great news to all of the people,

Savior, Messiah, and Lord. I think that you are to be more than a skilled craftsman in Nazareth and that you are to do more for all people than I can grasp or understand. That is a lot to share with you, I know, but I think it is time that you begin to hear your story so that you can seek to obey the will of the one true God of all creation. I am going to bed now. We can talk more tomorrow. You should go to bed soon. You have a lot to do in the days to come.

*Pray with me: Father we thank you for the words of the angel you sent to the shepherd that night so long ago. We thank you for the gift of Jesus, the Son of God, who came as a baby in the little town of Bethlehem. Come, Holy Spirit, and guide us into the joy that the shepherds had when they heard the great news of the coming of the Savior, Messiah, and Lord. Praise be to God. Amen*