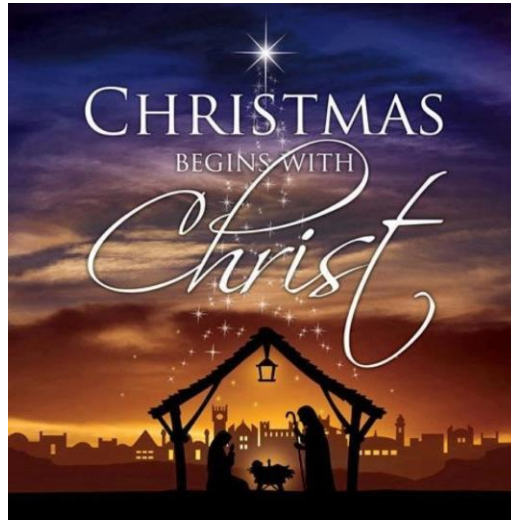


Sermon – December 24, 2022
The Rev. John C. Wright



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, and fill our open hearts anew. Anoint the sharing of these words, blessing your people, transforming us into Christ's image, and guiding us to fruitful labor in Jesus' mission right here, right now.

Amen

Good evening, all. Welcome to everyone on this very cold winter evening. If we had any doubts that winter comes to Virginia, I think they have been dispelled. We know from the text that was read this evening that Mary has given birth to her first-born son, wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in the manger. Mary has also been given some information earlier, as her pregnancy began, by the angel Gabriel about who her son will be, but there is more about this child yet to be revealed. For the Hebrews, a new day starts with sunset, and we think Mary's first-born son was born sometime in the night hours of this new day. A good guess at the time of day for our time with the shepherds is that it is most likely now somewhere in the early hours of that same day. Mother and baby are perhaps resting.

One of the most dramatic scenes in the accounts of Jesus' birth is the delivery of a message from God by an angel to shepherds. Think about this for a moment. These shepherds have been keeping sheep all of their lives. They are hard workers, laboring in a job that requires them to live away from others in order to shepherd the flock in the remote fields where sheep

graze. There are no city lights, no cell towers, no cars running on the road. There are only the sounds of sheep resting and the darkness of night broken dimly by the lights of the night sky. And suddenly into this deep darkness, light comes as an angel appears, bringing with it the shining light of the shekinah glory of God. A light that shines all around them, this is the light that marks a holy messenger from God. As this light breaks in, darkness is pushed away.

To say these shepherds were terrified is probably one of the many great understatements found in the birth account. I suspect that if I had been present, I would have been face down on the ground looking for a place to hide. The light shining around the shepherds is not earthly but heavenly, as is the messenger who now stands before them. Into the fear that the shepherds have comes the first part of the message from the angel: “Do not be afraid.”ⁱ These are the words of release from fear that allow one in the presence of an angel to receive peace. All who find themselves in the presence of an angel need to hear these words so that they may rise up and receive the message God’s angel has come to give them. The angel’s words release the shepherds from their fear and then the angel gives them the message: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” Notice there are two parts to the angel’s message. The first part of the message is about what has already taken place this day in the city of David and the second part is the giving of a sign by the angel to the shepherds to verify the first part of the message from God. They can use the sign to verify the angel’s message. This evening we will focus on the first part of the angel’s message, the Good News that has come. To help us grasp what Luke is sharing in this text, we may find it helpful to recall that Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem because of a decree from the emperor to all of the world to go to their home towns and be counted in a census. Counting, in reality, is done by paying the tax levied by the emperor. The emperor who issued this decree was Augustus, whose own birth was heralded in Rome by political leaders as follows: “Augustus having been born for the common good of all ... and providing him for the benefaction of mankind, sending us and those after us a savior who put an end to war and established all things; and whereas Augustus when he appeared exceeded the hopes of all who had anticipated good tidings ...; and whereas the birthday of the god marked for the world the beginning of good tidings through his coming....”ⁱⁱ These words describe the ruler of the world seated in Rome. The message from the angel to the shepherds stands in clear

contrast to the words spoken about the emperor Augustus, a contrast between the hope placed by humanity in an earthly king living in the splendor of Rome who is proclaimed divine by humanity and one who is lying in a manger in a stable yet is heralded by heavenly beings.

Like the message about Augustus heralded in Rome, the angel who appears to the shepherds in the field heralds the birth of a ruler. The angel's claims counter those made by or about Augustus and speak instead to a ruler whose reign will be over all and will never end. A ruler who will be their Lord. A ruler who will not end war by conquering other nations, but a ruler whose arrival brings peace with justice, shalom, to his people. The angel proclaims a ruler who will be the people's savior, not from the struggles found with and between earthly kingdoms, but from bondage to sin and death. The ruler whom the shepherds are told of by the angels has been born this day in the city of David. The words of the angel connect us to Isaiah's prophecy for a coming ruler whose arrival initiates the reign of God in peace and justice. The Good News the angel shares is that this ruler's birth has taken place. The new everlasting reign of God in peace and justice has begun. The message of the angel given to the shepherds is truly "Good News."

The Good News is not given by the angel to kings and rulers in royal places such as Rome, nor does the Good News come to those in the temple in Jerusalem, the place where God has met with His people. The Good News comes to shepherds in a field outside far from the temple in a place that is unconnected from the temple. Not only is God reshaping His rule over the earth, but God has moved out of the temple into a field giving the Good News to shepherds and not chief priests, the leaders of the temple. The role of the temple as a connection to God is also being reshaped and changed through this new ruler. The Good News shared with the shepherds is that the savior, the Messiah, the Lord has been born. Something new has begun, something outside of the understanding of the leaders of state and religion. Good News of great joy has broken in through the birth of a baby this day in the city of David.

As soon as the message from God the angel had been sent with has been delivered to the shepherds, the angel is joined by a host of angels saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"ⁱⁱⁱ The heavenly host that floods onto and around the hilltop where the shepherds are have no new message. They have come to praise God and declare that peace will now and forever more be found on earth between God and those whom he favors. With the delivery of the message from heaven by the first angel, a reason for

praise by heavenly beings has occurred and, in response, the heavenly host cannot contain themselves but must cry out in praise to God for the arrival of the child who brings peace on earth. The birth of this baby changes everything. God has come to earth and taken on flesh. God is with us in a manner we cannot understand, but we can receive him in our hearts.

Sadly, the message of the angel to the shepherds, the Good News of the arrival of a child born this day, is mostly lost in our culture today. The focus for most at Christmas has become more the giving of gifts to each other and less about celebrating the arrival of God in the flesh as our savior, Messiah, and Lord. Now don't get me wrong, I do like to be given a gift, to unwrap it, discover what it is, catch the thoughtfulness that has gone into the selection of the gift, and then put the gift to its intended use. The gift of a baby, God in the flesh, sent from God is more difficult to receive, unwrap, discover what it is, grasp the thoughtfulness or steadfast love God has for us found in this gift, and then put the gift of a savior to its intended use in our lives. God's gift of a savior is not a gift intended to be placed on a shelf, but is a gift given for us to use that we might have peace between God and ourselves. Most gifts I have been given I can figure out their use and enjoy the gift. As example, I know what to do with a Zero bar, hammer, wrench, or books. The gift of a savior is more difficult to receive as it is Good News of great joy for all people. The idea of receiving this gift is also connected to God's favor. The Jewish idea of God's favor is that a person is included in God's chosen people. The connection to God's favor for the receiving of the gift of Good News connects us to the idea that this gift is not a universal gift given equally to all people, but a gift that brings salvation to those who will respond to God's grace. The baby born in the city of David is for all, but not all will receive this gift, open it, discover the love it holds, and respond in faith.

Let me encourage us to remember the baby laid in a manger with every gift that we give. We as those in the kingdom of heaven are not seeking to find the perfect gift to give, but are seeking to reflect the love of God seen in the gift of a savior, Messiah, and Lord to us. It is the reason we give each other gifts. Remember our Lord with every gift we give. Remember our Messiah with every gift we open. Remember the first-born son of Mary, wrapped in bands of cloth, placed in a manger, and heralded on the hilltops by angels as God's gift was given and everything changed for all humanity. Remember a baby, humbly born in a stable for animals, wrapped in bands of cloth and placed in a manger. He is our savior, Messiah, Lord. Glory to God in heaven and on earth peace to those whom God favors.

Prayer: Father God, we give thanks and raise our voices this night in praise as we remember a baby wrapped in cloths and placed in a manger. Help us, Lord, to receive the great gift of a savior, Messiah, and Lord and to say with the angelic host, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"^{iv} We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ NRSV

ⁱⁱ The Gospel of Luke (p. 133). Eerdmans. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ NRSV

^{iv} NRSV Bible