

Christmas Eve

Year B

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: 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." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

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." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Prayer:

Loving Father,

2,000 years ago the Angels sang about the good news of great joy.

Each of us is called to share that joy, and to sing that song.

-AMEN

Sermon

The Christmas story brings us here tonight,

Despite the Covid, despite the ongoing political drama,

Despite all the “real world” stuff that in the back of our minds.

The Christmas story brings us here tonight,

Because we know that Jesus came to bring us the peace

which passes all understanding, and that

we all want a little bit of that peace.

Peace is at the heart, of the New Testament.

In fact, the word “peace” is mentioned at least 420 times. ⁱ

Peace is a constant theme in the stories about Jesus.

We see peace as the center of the nativity, but

the facts as we know them are a little unclear.

Matthew and Luke wrote the only Gospels

that mention the Nativity. ⁱⁱ

The Nativity story that most of know

is a blend of those two Gospels.

- In Matthew’s Gospel, there are Kings, but no shepherds.
- In Luke’s Gospelⁱⁱⁱ, there are shepherds, but no Kings.

Even when the details get mixed up, the message doesn't.
The Christmas Story still reminds us that Jesus came
to be a Light to the World, and to show us
how to build His Father's Kingdom.

I've read that there are around 3 Billion Christians today.
Pretty big crowd.

But the Bible tells us the Jesus movement
had a rather modest start.

Considering the opposition, and the rough start,
It's a real miracle that Jesus' light still shines,
and that his work continues.

When Joseph and his very pregnant young wife, Mary,
traveled to his Bethlehem, for the Roman Imperial census,
travel was hard, slow, hot and dangerous.

Remember the Good Samaritan?
That's the parable about a good guy helping a stranger,
who was mugged and almost killed, travelling alone.^{iv}

A guy, with a small bag of loose change, Travelling alone
except for a very pregnant teen age wife,
Would've been easy pickings!

I am sure that was on Joseph and Mary's their minds,
As they began the scary one-way, *90-mile*,
Walk from Nazareth to Bethlehem.
I imagine they weren't too thrilled.^v

But the Christmas story kind of by-passes that detail.
So what's the story about?

The Christmas Story is about The Son of God.
We all know that much.

The New Testament tells us that Jesus
pushed back against the same worldly powers,
that enslaved People back then, and still do today.
The Christmas story *is* about that Jesus.

But that's not the entire Christmas story. *Not at all.*
Jesus also came to show the way to peace, and
to shine a bright light,
on a world that seems to return to the darkness,
again and again and again.

Jesus' light still shines.
Keeping the torch lit is part of our job as Christian people.

Jesus came to show us how to live,
Not just for ourselves, But for others.

Jesus did come to set us free, and he has, and he will,
From generation to generation.

But he also came *to show us how to live well,*
and who we shall serve. ^{vi}

The Christmas story is about whether we choose to be a light
to a world that is always threatened by darkness,
or we choose to stick with whatever nonsense
the politicians, and the advertisements,
and the newest gadgets,
and the headlines offer.

The Christmas story is not about us choosing to live,
safe in the bosom of family and friends,
and the womb of our comfort zone.

The Christmas story is about conquering our fears, through faith,
And bring the light to the World.
The Christmas story is about living in faith.

The Christmas Story is about our own dangerous journey
into the world, with Joseph and Mary, as role models.

The Christmas Story is about moving forward.
Not as naïve dreamers.

Not so much because we are always happy about the journey.
But because we are content,
Trusting that the Lord will provide.

Each of us has our strengths and our limits.
If we were one twig,
a strong arm or a powerful wind might break us.

But if we are bound together, like a bundle of twigs,
Bound together by our love and our church home, And
Knowing that Jesus is at work in our lives ...

We are stronger than any force, and we will endure --
as individuals, as one Church, One People, and One Kingdom.

Jesus was born into a world bathed in darkness.
So were we.

But the Heavenly Star, revealed Heaven's message to the Magi,
And it still shines for us.

Remember the bright light of the Angelic Choir
And their sweet voice, Summoning the shepherds...
the least of the least... To see the Child.

And that Child was born, like each of us,
Smack dab in the middle of the real world –
as crazy and confused then as ours is today.

Darkness and light were in constant battle, then.
They still are. And they will be until Jesus comes back.

*We have to choose sides. We really do! Let us choose the light!
Let us choose to stand with our God and His Son,
One church and one people,
A lighthouse in the darkness.*

Jesus, great earthly mission started with a baby boy,
An exhausted young mother, and an anxious earthly father.

Mayr and Joseph must have been stunned when
the wise men and the shepherds showed up to worship
the new King!

God usually started small then. A little baby boy.
He still starts small. When we say to Him, “I’m ready”,
He’ll take us wherever we are, and however we are.
And He’ll go from there.

His work becomes our work. Our lives become His.
And His Son, becomes Our Lord.
His work becomes our work.
That is Story of Christmas.

AMEN

ⁱ In Hebrew, the word most used for “peace” is “Shalom” and in Greek, the word is “eirene”. The Hebrew word for peace, šālôm, is usually translated in the Septuagint as the Greek word, eirēnē. Shalom often connotes a sense that things are settled because they have reached completeness, fulfillment or wholeness (although it can also refer to the peace which follows a military victory). The Greek word may lean more towards “peace” as we understand it, i.e., the presence of security, and well-being, or the absence of conflict. In Luke Jesus is proclaimed as the one who brings “peace on earth”.

ⁱⁱ Of the NT books, only Matthew and Luke mention the Nativity. This may be because the issue was not relevant to the message and the audience of the other books. Mark and John do not mention, for example, that Jesus was born of a virgin, although they do not teach to the contrary.

ⁱⁱⁱ Which we read today.

^{iv} He was on the Road to Jericho, not the road to Bethlehem. But still, an arduous and exhausting journey.

^v I wonder how they would have voted, if they had a chance, on the registration and tax to follow. Did they talk about the Census and the tax to follow? Did they talk about the fat cats in Rome, and The Empire’s ravenous armies? Even though Rome did bring a certain level of security, to travelers and merchants, Mary and Joseph lived in a tough world, that was difficult and dangerous. In fact, scholars suggest that the Gospel are slight on such details precisely because everyone knew about the dangers of travel in those days. See, Prof. James F. Strange, University of South Florida, Tampa. It would have taken Joseph and Mary more than a week to travel those 90 miles.

Besides unpaved, hilly trails and harsh weather, the heavily forested valley of the Jordan River, presented the threats of lions, bears and wild boars. Archeologists have found ancient documents warning travelers of the forest’s dangers. And then, according to Fr. Peter Vasko, a Catholic priest and director of the Holy Land Foundation, “bandits, pirates of the desert and robbers” were also common hazards along the major trade routes like the one Joseph and Mary would have traveled on. See, “A Long, Cold Road to Bethlehem”, Dec. 23, 1995, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-12-23-me-17102-story.html>, citing the Religion News Service

^{vi} But we must choose who we will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. Joshua 24:15