

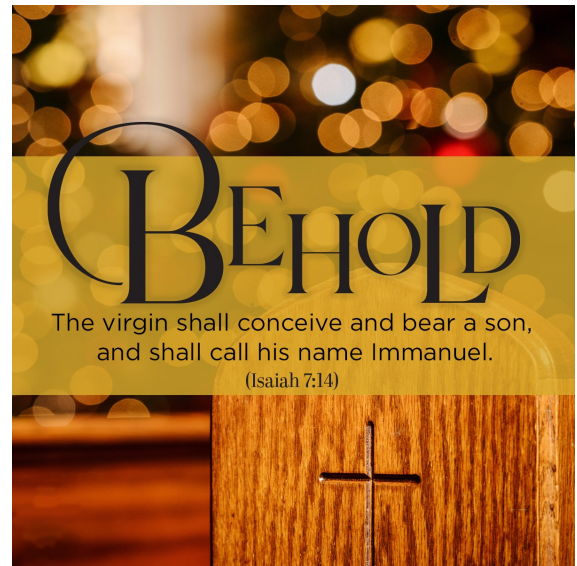
The Nativity of Our Lord

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2021

“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.”

Lk 2:15–16.



Make Haste for Christmas

Dear brothers and sisters: grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

On Christmas Eve we do something kind of special; we have candles, lots of candles, almost everyone has a candle. And, on those candles when we dim the lights and sing “Silent Night” here this evening there will be a flame – fire, dangerous fire. So, in case of fire or some other emergency please note the clearly marked exit signs in the sanctuary: there are two clearly marked above the doors. If a conflagration were to break out during our singing of “sleep in heavenly peace” merely make haste to exit the building. Now, please do not panic: I do not anticipate an emergency this evening. I also understand the inherent danger of beginning a sermon on Christmas Eve by telling you how to leave the building. But, in truth, I am telling you about this fictional emergency to make a point. There are times when “haste does not

make waste,” there are times when there is in fact a sense of urgency to respond to a set of circumstances – in haste. There are times when there is not a moment to be lost. The shepherds who are the recipients of the angel’s message on that night 2,000 years ago in the fields outside of Bethlehem were faced with just such a moment. And what we hear from St. Luke the Evangelist is this: “[the shepherds] went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.”¹

What’s going on here? What’s the big hurry? Well, to know why they were anxious to get to the manger we must know what it is that has instilled this sense of urgency in them. We find the answer in the message from the angel of the Lord. The story is probably very familiar to you. The Christ Child is born. He lies in a manger, a place where livestock feed would be offered to animals, because the normal places for guests were occupied. The Evangelist describes all of this in a few short sentences. Jesus has been born, that which the prophets had foretold, what the angel had announced to Mary and to Joseph, He is here. Now the scene shifts dramatically outdoors to another setting, to fields outside of Bethlehem. Here are the shepherds, “keeping watch over their flock by night.”² Now an angel appears to them, just like what happened to Zechariah when he was told about the coming birth of John the Baptist by his wife Elizabeth. Just like what happened to Mary when the angel Gabriel came to her and announced that she would become the bearer of the Infant Christ, God made man. These are all annunciations, announcements from God by means of His messengers, messages that break in upon the world in a real and

¹ Lk 2:16.

² Lk 2:8.

powerful way.

The angel comes and “the glory of the Lord shone around them.”³ And they have the same emotional response everyone would in the same circumstance. When Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist saw the angel of the Lord, he “was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.”⁴ The angel Gabriel comes to the Virgin Mary and says “Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying.”⁵ She was afraid. And now the angel comes to these lowly shepherds out in field, “and they were filled with great fear.”⁶ No surprise! But the angel has no come with bad news. He brings good news, news of great joy. Not only that, the message is for everyone, even for these shepherds out in the fields – actually, especially for these shepherds, and for all like them: the meek and lowly, the nobodies, just ordinary people in need of God’s grace and mercy. What is this good news of great joy? Here is it: ““Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”⁷ Fear not! Over twenty times in the New Testament we hear those words, sometimes from angels, sometimes from the Apostles, but even more so from our Lord Himself. He comes to to make manifest this promise that is heard in the shepherds’ fields. The message is this: in God’s providence a child is born who is the Saviour of the world, the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord. Here is the

3 Lk 2:9.

4 Lk 1:12.

5 Lk 1:28–29.

6 Lk 2:9.

7 Lk 2:10–11.

sign: a baby, wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger.

At this announcement the heavens break into song. An angelic chorus is praising God, they sing of His glory, they sing of the peace that He has brought to earth, peace with God among those who will see this baby and hear the message and believe. When? How? In St. Luke's account of the triumphal entry when Jesus will come into Jerusalem before His death, riding on a colt, the crowds there will also sing praises, they will say, "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"⁸ The peace is the peace of the Messiah, who comes to redeem His people. Christ has assumed unto Himself our likeness, and He comes humble, meek, without the trappings of this world. He comes not born in a palace in the lap of luxury. He comes not surrounded by armies and symbols of earthly power. He comes as the One who will be the suffering servant, He is headed to cross, to suffer a brutal death on behalf of you and me.

The infant Jesus is the sign of all these things. He points us to the power of God, the Gospel. And when those angels all break out into the heavenly chorus don't think that somehow heaven is some far away place and God stands apart looking upon this young family and the shepherds. For God is born in the flesh that night, Creator of heaven and earth and all that is, the One who creates and sustains life, the Eternally Begotten Second person of the Trinity, one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is there, and He is there for all. Even the shepherds, even you and me.

Then the angels are gone, and the night is dark, and the flocks are still there, and the

⁸ Lk 19:38.

shepherds look at one another. What just happened? What should we do now? I suppose they could have just shrugged their shoulders and went back to their shepherding duties. But if they did that there would always be a lingering question: what did that all mean, this message about an Infant Saviour, Christ the Lord? To do nothing would also mean to go on living in fear, not knowing if God was a God of wrath and judgement, or whether He was indeed for them, as the angels has spoken. So the shepherds did the only thing they could do: they chose to go and see. They said, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”⁹ Jesus has come. The angels herald the news. The angelic chorus invites all of us to sing God’s glory too, because the birth of the Christ Child means that God’s peace is now among His people. The shepherds go. Not only that, as we heard back when I started, they go in haste. They have a sense of urgency. How could they not? The time is now. The time we have been waiting for is upon us. The kingdom of God is near. Let us go and see!

Those shepherds were in possession of a treasure that transcends anything on earth. They couldn’t wait to go and see. Be here’s the question for today: how many Christians makes haste where the things of God are concerned? Surely if anything merits haste it is the things of God. Surely if anything merits haste it is this Infant lying in a manger. Just like the shepherds of the Nativity you are in possession of the same treasure. Do you have that same sense of urgency, that same haste, to go and see, when the things of God are concerned? Maybe we need to know what these

⁹ Lk 2:15.

“things of God” are. Quite simply they are what Christ brings. They are the forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life. These are things that are brought forth in the manger. But you see, you can’t peer into that crib and behold the Christ child for who He really is without a reality check, an examination of where we stand in the eyes of a holy and righteous God. We must understand that the Only-begotten was made flesh, that He endured to be born of a woman for our sakes, to put away the curse announced way back in the Garden.

Genesis describes the penalty, the Lord God pronounced the rupture that sin had opened between God and man. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring.”¹⁰ Martin Luther, never one to mince words, said, “We are poisoned by the venom of original sin from the soles of our feet to the hairs on our head.” We know this because God’s Holy Law shows us where we fall short, every day, if we are honest with ourselves, and with God. And we can also look around at the past two years and see how the times have seemed to unravel before our eyes. The world indeed is a fallen, broken place. For us right now everything takes place against the backdrop of the pandemic. Life just seems more difficult, sleep more challenging, and our plans more uncertain. The economy, inflation, housing costs, health, stress and anxiety at home, in the work place, and with almost everyone we meet, depression, ups and downs, a scary diagnosis, the death of someone close, plans set aside for the near future. In the midst of all of these things we gather together to hear once again that God comes for you in

¹⁰ Ge 3:15.

Bethlehem. God has made haste to help us in the sending of His Son. Will you make haste to hear Him? Will you make haste, in faith, to receive what He has promised?

Listen to the Words of our Lord: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”¹¹ For you. Jesus came for you, if today if you stand firm in the faith of your Baptism and look to Him and Him alone for faith and life.

Jesus came for you, if today you are not at all sure about this God stuff and are here just because it’s Christmas Eve and you are supposed to make an appearance. Jesus came for you, if you haven’t been in church for while and have gotten out of the habit of making haste to go and see, to receive all of His gifts in His Word and in His sacraments. Regardless of who you are, Jesus comes for you, He is your Saviour who has come to give life, life in all its fullness, and eternal, ongoing life, life with God as life is meant to be. So in these days of Christmas and in the coming year may we all look to the manger with the same sense of urgency that the shepherds had, and like them, may we, who behold and adore Him, make known what we have been told about this Child.

Amen.

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✠ Soli Deo Gloria

¹¹ Lk 2:11.