

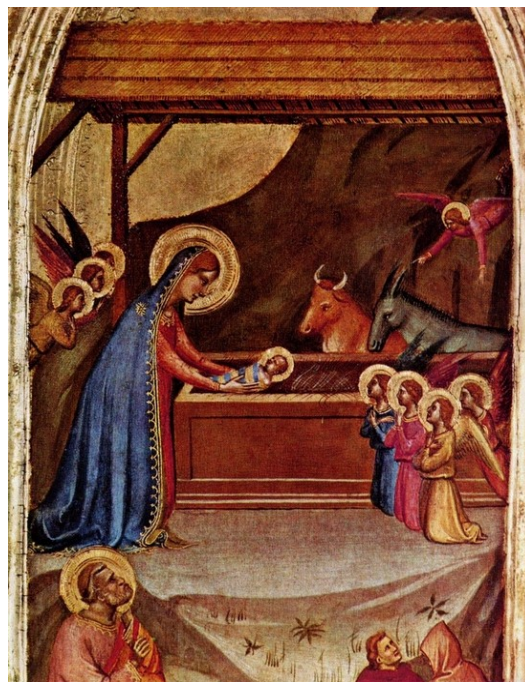
The Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

December 18, 2022

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace,
Good will toward men.

Lk 2:14.



The Christmas Breakthrough

In the name of the Father, and of the ✝ Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Tonight is a breakthrough. Really? That’s a word that gets tossed around quite a bit in our day and age. It means a sudden, dramatic, important development. You hear it all the time. Everything is a breakthrough nowadays. We have breakthroughs in science—perhaps you heard about the new “breakthrough” in fusion energy from a few weeks ago that could lead to new, unlimited, clean sources of power...perhaps 40 or 50 years from now. There are constantly new treatments and drugs in medicine, legitimate breakthrough discoveries that were unheard of even a generation ago to help with all manner of diseases and disabilities. In popular culture: professional athletes are always looking for that breakthrough performance level when they achieve their full potential and get the big contract; entertainers are always looking to breakthrough to new audiences and win new accolades and adoration; politicians

are always looking to breakthrough with the next election. We are inundated with breakthroughs, everything must be a breakthrough because everything tends to be hyped more and more to try and gain the attention of our media saturated eyeballs. But Christmas Eve? A breakthrough? It would seem exactly the opposite. So much of what we do and say and think we know about this annual celebration is dictated by all the layers of tradition and experience that we have accumulated over the years. We do the same things, eat the same things, see the same people, have all the same expectations. Not all of that is necessarily bad. But it's certainly not new. Certainly not a breakthrough. Well, perhaps that's a problem. Perhaps we should once again peel away all the layers we have added, and instead once again behold the story of the Birth of Christ in a rightful sense of awe and adoration. For we gather together this evening to celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord, the night when God Himself came into our world, when He assumed unto Himself our humanity and dwelt with us. There has never been a night like that one. There has never been a breakthrough like that. For when Christ was born and laid in a manger the heavens opened and the glory of the Lord was revealed. The Christ Child comes and breaks through into history. He breaks through the present darkness of this corrupt and evil world. And He breaks through into your life, tonight, tomorrow, and unto eternity.

St. Luke gives us quite a bit of detail in the familiar story of how Mary and Joseph ended up in Bethlehem when the days were accomplished that she should give birth. The details matter, because the details place this story out of the realm of myth and

into the tangible history of world events. Jesus Christ belongs to a time and a place that can be precisely dated and a geographical area that is precisely defined. Here is what we know for sure: “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David.”¹ In these words of St. Luke the universal and concrete come together. The context is important. “All the world” is to be registered, for at that time a government existed in the form of the Roman Empire that spanned the entire known world. Our Lord breaks through into history because only now, in this moment when Augustus reigns over the Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome, only when there is a commonality of language, a cultural community that can trade in goods and ideas. Only now can a message of universal salvation go out and breakthrough and enter the world: it is indeed the “fullness of time.” And even though the high and lofty Caesar knows nothing of these two insignificant nobodies from nowhere, Mary and Joseph, who make this journey to Bethlehem, their journey brings to fulfillment the prophecy from the prophet Micah that the Messiah, the Christ, was to be born in that city. The breakthrough is foretold by God Himself by the prophets, and He is good to His Word.

And so when the days were accomplished while they were in the City of David Mary

¹ Lk 2:1–4.

gave birth “and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger.”² Here lies the One Incarnate of the Holy Spirit, born of Virgin, the only begotten Son of God. God’s prophet Isaiah speaks of how a people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.³ Isaiah speaks of the light of Christ, the Dawn from on High, who breaks through into the present darkness. In the beginning God said let there be light. He separated the light from the darkness, and the light he called day and the darkness he called night. He gave us day and night, he gave us time for the light and time for the dark. The light broke through the darkness. And now the Light breaks through again when God becomes man. The light shone round about the shepherds as God’s angel came speaking good news of great joy. God came Himself, in the flesh, multiplying His people through faith. God came bringing peace as a Prince on earth, so there would be increased joy to the world. From the manger, God put forth his Son—now the ancient and the angelic message is confirmed. Light isn’t supposed to shine in darkness. Tonight, the light breaks through. Of course, we have real darkness in our time. Just look at the news, in spite of all the supposedly great breakthroughs of modernity. The darkness is always there, we are always threatened by it. And so we are born walking in it. And we use it to conceal ourselves and our own walks of shame. We get lost in the dark, not knowing what to do or where to go. But just before you wonder if God has walked back a single promise or is gravely silent, tonight...behold a great light. The light breaks through the darkness. The light is

² Lk 2:7.

³ Is 9:2.

Christ, for “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”⁴

The breakthrough of light into the darkness of sin and death is not heralded—in other words, not announced publicly—in the way we might expect. The ministry of Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, is also not what people are expecting. For He comes not at the front of a mighty army, not financed with unimaginable wealth and supported by all the right people in all the right places. No, the Saviour of the world comes born not into luxury but as part of a simple, poor, peasant family, in the kinds of place that poor people were all too familiar with. Then the news of this breakthrough is not brought by royal messenger to Augustus or even to Herod, who will soon take a malevolent interest in the child. The Good News is heralded by the angel of the Lord, that divine messenger of hope who comes with a message straight from the throne of heaven. The message is brought to shepherds who are out in the fields by night watching over their animals.

Now, the fact that shepherds are the ones who get this news is a huge breakthrough in and of itself. You see, the teachers of the Law in the time when Jesus was born, called Pharisees, didn’t think very much of shepherds. In fact, one of the rabbis associated with this particular form of Judaism said this: “You will find that there is no more contemptible occupation in the world than that of the shepherd.” Another one said, “A man should not train his son to be a donkey driver, a camel driver, a

⁴ Jn 1:4–5.

barber...a shepherd, or a grocer. For their trade is the trade of robbers.”⁵ How did they end up on the bottom of the social ladder? It was thought that shepherds would let their animals go around and graze on other people’s property, which was stealing. It just steamrolled from there into something much bigger: all shepherds are bad people, so bad in fact that they are ritually unclean, outside of God’s mercy. So to these least ones, outcasts, comes the breakthrough message: “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.”⁶ These shepherds show us where God’s grace and mercy is directed. Jesus will direct His earthly ministry to the same kinds of people—the poor, the persecuted, the needy, sinners.

But this is why the Baby lies in the manger. He has come as the breakthrough to sinners in need, with the offer of the forgiveness and eternal life. For this Baby will grow up one day and be nailed to a rough cross in Jerusalem, not too far from the manger in Bethlehem. And then He will rise again from the dead because in His death on the cross He he breaks through and conquers death once and for all.

Tonight is indeed a breakthrough, it is the Good News given unto us all, that born unto us is a Saviour. He comes to save. All these things are in view this Christmas Eve. St. Paul puts it like this: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.”⁷ This appearance is the breakthrough for you and for everyone, for now we can “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him

5 Str.-B, II,131.

6 Lk 2:10–11.

7 Tt 2:11.

we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”⁸ So says St. Paul. Perhaps the Apostle wrote those wonderful words in his letter to the Romans thinking of the Nativity of our Lord, for here is where the Glory of God is revealed that dark night to those shepherds, to the most unworthy. Well, here tonight, the Glory of God is also revealed to you, only it comes by His Word, by the working of the Holy Spirit who creates and builds faith.

Indeed that first Christmas was a breakthrough. Who would expect a “multitude” of angels to announce peace to a bunch of humble shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night? Yet when a multitude of God’s messengers emerge from heaven’s glory into the darkness of night, we pay attention. They do not speak often, but when they do, we listen. Carefully. Very carefully. And now we sing their hymn in our own worship: “Glory to God on high: and on earth, peace, goodwill toward men.” We sing with joy and hope because we have heard our Lord declare us forgiven by His Word, and we know that we belong to Him in Baptism and are made part of His family. We cried out for mercy and found God’s care and concern. He was with us. He heard our cries for help. We have hope. The angel’s song is the song of breakthrough and triumph, and it is our song, a song that sounds into the eternal courts of heaven itself. “Glory to God on high.” For a moment again, heaven actually breaks through to where we are this very night. You see, heaven is not some place up in the clouds or in a distant part of another galaxy. Heaven is where God is. In

⁸ Ro 5:1–2.

Christ heaven and earth are joined, and we who are in Christ have a sense—tonight, tomorrow, and unto the ages to come—of being in the presence of God. For we stand on the very edge between heaven and earth, between our temporal struggles and eternity. By the Word of God we sense its closeness. Soon we, too, will be there, fully in the presence of our Saviour. Faith looks into eternity and finds joy of what will be. Faith looks into eternity and finds a breakthrough. For on this most holy of nights, a Child is born, a Son is given, for you.

And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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✠ Soli Deo Gloria