

Written Copy: Luke 2:15-20 “Rejoice, Worship, Meditate and Ponder Nativity of Our Lord

Christmas Eve Thursday, December 24th, 2020

Text: Luke 2:15-20

¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Exegetical Statement

Shepherds out in the open fields keeping watch over their flock are suddenly aroused and frightened by first one angel, then a host of angels as the darkness of the night explode in the reflected glory of God Almighty. They hear with wonder of the fantastic events that have just transpired. The LORD has fulfilled the promise given since the Fall and has sent the long-awaited Messiah, and in a most surprising turn of events He has come as a newborn infant, not born in palace or more fitting surroundings, but amongst the cattle in a barn, and is resting in a feeding trough. When the angels finish their job of describing these fantastic events the shepherds, moved by faith, must hurry and journey to Bethlehem and find this baby. When they do they tell first Mary and Joseph all the angels had related, and then all they encounter in Bethlehem and on their return to their flocks. Those townsfolk who hear this incredible tale are awestruck and marvel at it. But none are moved as the shepherds were to do anything about it. But for Mary all that has happen and that she has heard sticks with her. She will remember this night and ponder all that has been said, working on putting these things together as to what they will mean for her newborn boy. The shepherds return responding now just as the angels had, glorifying and praising God for that they had seen and heard

Focus Statement:

The angels were sent by God to announce the long-awaited fulfillment of the promised Messiah. The wonder that God came to earth as a baby in order to be our sacrifice for sin and the means to restore peace between God and His creation. This wonderous announcement has the power from the Spirit to create faith, moving men to action and contemplation of the wonderous love of God for sinners

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We hear this Christmas tale every year. It is a beloved tradition for many to come worship Christmas Eve, sing and celebrate our Savior's birth. But is our reaction to it more like the shepherds for whom the message moves them to faithful action? Or like the townsfolk that simply wonder and marvel, but do nothing, forgetting about it as time passes? Or are we like Mary, keeping the mystery, wonder, and joy at the forefront and meditating on what it means "for me"?

What the hearer should do as a result:

Put ourselves on the hillside with the shepherds. Put ourselves with them as they witness the humble beginnings of our Mighty Savior. Rejoice with the shepherds. Contemplate with Mary how this one night has changed our lives forever, from now going forward.

Subject Sentence: Let Christmas Story Move You to Faith and Action

Introduction: When the Luster fades from the Wonderous

It's the time of the year when we love watching the classic Christmas movies. And I'm sure you each have your favorites. But think about the ones that, when you first saw them moved you in a special way. Like the first time you saw the drama of "It's a Wonderful Life" where George Bailey, having been shown the worth he has as a human being is given his life back and the town is saved. Or "The Santa Clause" where, for me, when Scott Calvin's ex-wife and her new husband realize that Scott really is Santa Clause, that still to this day tugs at my heart strings. But maybe the most surprising moment for me came the first time I saw "Planes, Trains, And Automobiles", a movie actually set around Thanksgiving. Most of the movie is a satire of what travel is like around the normal holidays, and the nightmare involved in each mode of public transportation. It pairs up two unlikely men, a successful reserved businessman, Neal Page (played by Steve Martin), and a blabbermouth shower ring curtain salesman, Del Griffin (played by John Candy). Del finds and latches on to Neal as he tries anyway he can, to get home in time to celebrate Thanksgiving. But a snowstorm hampers travel in every mode of transportation. And try as he might, Neal can't shake Del who just keeps showing up, so that they end up teaming up to get home in time. After a variety of misadventures, as Neal reaches his hometown, he finally does get to say goodbye to Del and leave him behind at the train station. The moment that sticks with me is when Neal realizes that Del has no home to go to. That the wife Del always talked about and carries a picture of has passed on. That Del latched onto him because he is in fact all alone. Neal turns around and sure enough finds Del sitting all alone on Thanksgiving at the train station. And he invites Del into his home for Thanksgiving. That is a wonderfully touching moment for me.

We watch these movies this time every year and enjoy them, but let's face it, they don't move us the same way as when we first saw them. The luster fades with time and repeated watching until, at least at my house, they become more of a background soundtrack than entertainment.

There's also the reaction of people when tell them some great news, or even something special that has happened to you. Take for example when you announced to a group of friends the birth of a new child or grandchild. There is the initial recognition and congratulations, but their excitement and interest quickly fade. They turn to the next exciting announcement of the group or of the day, and leave you there hanging. They leave you with uncommunicated joy and wonder that they didn't share in the same way you did. The emotion that moved you deep inside falls short of their ears.

The Excitement, Wonder, Joy of the Shepherds

In this respect think about the shepherds from our Christmas tale. They experienced a once in a lifetime glorious, fantastic, out of this world event. Out in the fields, where the only light would come from whatever stars are visible in the sky, and as some sleep while others work at staying awake to watch over the sheep, suddenly the sky and surrounding land receives a blast of glorious light. An angel is there, telling them a wondrous story that exceeds the brightness of the light. The long-awaited Savior of the world has come. The one from the line of David, promised so long ago, who was to rule on David's throne with an eternal kingdom. One who is not just the human Messiah, but in some way that they can't fully comprehend, is the Divine Lord! And most remarkably of all, this Savior has come in the form of a newborn infant, wrapped snugly in strips of cloth and lying not in a bed fit for the king that He is, but in the feeding trough for animals. Then before their eyes an uncountable number of the Lord's angelic army appears. These are not cute little cherubs. These are mighty warrior angels praising God, proclaiming the highest glory belongs to Him. And because of the coming of this child, God's peace is being given to all mankind.

As the angels recede back into heaven these shepherds stare at one another. This night they know that everything has changed for them. God's very words as given to them by angels move them first to faith, believing that all the angels told them is true, and in that faith, they are moved to action. They are so moved that they abandon the sheep in the field and travel some distance into Bethlehem, because they must see what the angels describe for themselves. And they find Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus just as the angels had told them they would.

And what are they moved to do next? To tell! To tell Mary and Joseph first all that they saw, and were told, and found to be true. But they didn't stop there. They spread the report of all they had seen and heard about this child: who He really is, and why the Lord sent Him. They spread this report in the city of Bethlehem and the surrounding area. They told all those they encountered after leaving Mary and Joseph on their way back to their sheep in the fields. Their actions are reflecting the lifechanging message they had heard, and the faith which has the power to change their life.

The Reaction of the Townsfolk

Compare their reaction to the townsfolk to whom the Shepherds told all that they had heard and seen. They marveled at the story. They thought it a wondrous tale. Perhaps it really happened, perhaps not. But what did they do upon hearing it? Nothing. There is no indication their reaction matched the shepherds. They were not moved to go check it out as the shepherds were. There isn't even any indication that this made a lasting impression on anyone. Forty days later, when Mary and Joseph bring baby Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill the law for newborn babies and mothers, no one seems to know anything of what had transpired Christmas night. Only Simeon and Anna react, and that is

because they were given divine revelation on who this baby is. Jerusalem is 6.5 miles away from Bethlehem, but no one there has heard anything about this wonderous event. Or if they did, like the townsfolk of Bethlehem, having heard they soon forgot. They turned their focus on to other pressing matters of their daily life. The news of this child's birth changed nothing in their lives.

There is a similar reaction among people today. The story of Jesus birth is a quaint tale that is part of the season. They believe that coming and worshipping is part of the holiday tradition that they do every year. Well, perhaps not this year because of COVID they reason, but they believe they will make up for it next year. A quaint tale and quaint tradition that is all but forgotten tomorrow in the unwrapping of presents and the holiday dinners. It's all but forgotten in the plans for New Year's Eve. It's all but forgotten in the worry, the fear, and the depression filled life under COVID-19 quarantine. For some the wonder and faith that these true words of Scripture bring to hearts and minds is allowed to fade just as quickly as all the other Christmas trappings in the days following Christmas. Just as in Bethlehem it makes no real lasting impression or change.

The Reaction of Mary and the Church

But Mary's reaction stands as complete opposite. She treasured up all that she had heard, not just from the shepherds, but from the angel that first came to her, and then to Joseph in Nazareth. She treasured the revelation of God's saving work that had finally been put into action. This baby had come in a most miraculous way. A human baby divinely conceived in her womb as the Holy Spirit overshadowed her. The baby who was the long-promised Messiah in the line of David, fully human, and yet, more than human. This baby was at the same time the Lord. The angel called Him the Son of the Living God. And He was named Jesus because He would, in a manner Mary would only come to understand after it happened, save His people from their sins. She certainly has plenty to treasure, plenty to contemplate, plenty to consider and ruminate on for some time to come. Unlike the townsfolk she would not forget. But she would reflect on all that had been revealed and would keep reflecting on it as her life and the life of her son progressed.

As much as Mary had to reflect on, how much more do we? We have the whole life work of this very special child set before us. We have the understanding of how this child would go about becoming the Savior of the world. We have the promises and revelation of God throughout the ages before us and see them one by one fulfilled in the life of Mary's son Jesus Christ. We see His perfect life which demonstrated His perfect service to God and to mankind: teaching, healing, casting out demons. We see this life of humble sacrificial love being rewarded with the death sentence. We see Him willingly go to the cross to be the Lamb of sacrifice for all mankind. We see our sin cast upon Him and hear His words, words said to you and to me in regard to that sin: "It is finished. Your bill has been paid. You now have peace with God." We see the confirmation of all of that in His resurrection.

We have all this laid before us in God's Word to us: the Gospel Message of Jesus life, death and resurrection. And all this was given to you. Maybe not by an angelic choir, but by the Spirit of God speaking it into your heart in your baptism and confirming it every time you hear it preached. The proclamation that tells you that although you continue to sin, you continue to be washed clean. You remain at peace with God now, and the inheritance of Eternal Life to come is yours. And no one can take it from you.

What is your reaction? Townsfolk? Or Shepherds/Mary?

And there it is. What Christmas is all about for those who believe in Christ. There it is, the message to all who do not believe, for it is God's desire that you would hear and believe. The question is, what is your reaction? Who do you most resemble this night and going forward? The townsfolk or Mary and the Shepherds? Is all that we sing, and read, and hear, and pray about just the normal part of Christmas celebration? Or is it something more?

My prayer for you is that you would leave here a combination of Mary and the Shepherds. If it was any other year I might be pushing the Shepherd aspect of proclaiming this wonderful Christmas news to all your neighbors and friends wherever you go. But I realize that due to COVID many of you are staying home for the holidays. But what about your presence on social media? What about your connections with others via phone calls and texts? Will the wonder and joy of this baby born to Mary and what He came to do for you and for all men; will that get pushed aside by fear and depression over COVID-19? Will it lose its place because of all we feel we need to post about concerning government, and conspiracies, and the examples of brokenness in this world which this baby was sent to fix? Or will you, as you have opportunity, be the same mouthpiece as the shepherds proclaiming that God's peace has come to all people through this child born in Bethlehem? Peace which He made between God and you right now. Peace which is proclaimed by His Church. Peace which will rule the whole universe uncontested on the Last Day.

Will you spend some quiet time like Mary contemplating all that this miracle on Christmas means to you? Will you contemplate it as the Church moves forward throughout the seasons of the Church year, as we follow the life and ministry of Jesus; will you contemplate what they mean to you now with an eye toward eternity? Will you spend some time in quiet contemplation and thanksgiving that the LORD, through His work in the Gospel Message, impressed upon you that this is more than just a tale? That this is a life changing event for you, one that brought faith and hope into your life? Will you take time to contemplate how the One that brought salvation, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life to you, gifts that you did not deserve, yet have received over and over in abundance? Will you spend time in private and group study of these Words so that the Spirit can continue to change you, grow your faith, and instill that peace of Christ within you in an ever-increasing way? My prayer is that you will.

Conclusion

Once again, it's Christmas Eve and you've chosen to spend it here with us here at Lamb of God, and I'm so thankful that you have. The story hasn't changed from last year. It's the same baby born to the same virgin Mary, wrapped in the same swaddling cloths, laid in the same manger. It's the same angels appearing to the same shepherds, who are moved to go see this baby and then spread a report all around. And maybe for some that's all it is. But I pray for you that it's a chance to renew your wonder at this once in a lifetime miracle, the one that is the cause of ongoing miraculous work in your heart and life. I pray that you contemplate anew this baby who came in a most miraculous way to bring something you could never earn or achieve on your own: peace. He came to bring you true peace that lives even in the midst of a Pandemic. Peace with God, and through that the beginning of peace with your fellow man. The best Christmas present ever: salvation from eternal death, forgiveness of all your sins, and the best present that is yet to come. Eternal Life. Merry Christmas Amen.