



Liturgical Day: The Nativity of Our Lord

Date: December 24, 2008

Sermon Title: Christmas Hope; Christmas Peace; Christmas Joy

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Merry Christmas to you all. Thank you for joining us. It is a beautiful night, and it is nice to have you here at Saint Peter. I look forward to this night every year. Our college students are back in town: at Christmas we see many of them for the first time since August. Families are together. Family members who don't usually end up here at Saint Peter – either because they worship elsewhere, or because they don't often worship – join us for Christmas Eve, and it's good to have them with us. I'm glad to see you all, and want to commend you for making worship a part of your celebration of Christmas.

After all, that's what it is all about. The earliest celebration of Christ's birth, in the first part of the fourth century, was called the *Christ Mass*. Those of you who were (or are) Roman Catholic know what that means, don't you? *Mass* is the word that Catholics use for the Eucharist, or what some Lutherans call *Holy Communion*. At the heart of Christmas is the *Christ Mass* – the celebration of Christ in word and sacrament. So by realizing that worship needs to be at the heart of your family's Christmas celebration, you have honored its original intent in an important way.

Christmas is, and ought to be, centered around this time together in worship. In all honesty, though, I have to say that Christmas isn't the most important time that we to gather as God's people. Easter actually is the center of the Christian church year, just as the resurrection of Jesus is the center of our faith. The Apostle Paul wrote that if there is no resurrection, then nothing else about Jesus really matters.ⁱ In the resurrection, we believe that God has won the final battle over death, and is able to assure us the gift of eternal life. So the primary focus of the church's life together is not on Christmas; it is on Easter. Everything that comes before Easter (including Christmas) leads up to it. Everything that comes after Easter follows from it.

Yet year after year, Christmas Eve worship services draw the biggest crowds, and those of you who are with us tonight are proof of that.

No doubt, this is in part due to the lovely story that stands at the center of Christmas: the story of a humble young couple, who welcome their first son into the world. Images in our head abound, and most of them are very pleasant. We often envision a scene where a pretty young woman and her handsome companion stand at the side of a crib, filled with bright golden straw. They are surrounded by animals, and the steam of their breath is visible, but other than that even the animals are quiet and respectful. It is late at night, yet they are all bathed in the soft glow of a gentle light. We see this scene on greeting cards, on Christmas tree ornaments, and in everything from front yard displays to enormous, living Nativity scenes. It is a nostalgic image of peace; of serenity; of comfort and joy.

In some ways, this nativity scene symbolizes the hopes and dreams of this season. It comforts us. It inspires us. It reminds us that God can accomplish what is remarkable from even the most humble of beginnings. And it is often the case that during Christmas time, we find ourselves just a bit more content; just a bit more relaxed; just a bit more joyful; just a bit more hopeful than during the rest of the year. It seems like a time when we get a glimpse of the better angels of our human

FIRST LESSON

ISAIAH 9:2-7

PSALM

PSALM 96

SECOND LESSON

TITUS 2:11-14

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. LUKE 2:1-20

PRAYER OF THE DAY

ALMIGHTY GOD, YOU
MADE THIS HOLY NIGHT
SHINE WITH THE BRIGHTNESS
OF THE TRUE LIGHT. GRANT
THAT HERE ON EARTH WE
MAY WALK IN THE LIGHT OF
JESUS' PRESENCE AND IN THE
LAST DAY WAKE TO THE
BRIGHTNESS OF HIS GLORY;
THROUGH YOUR ONLY
SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR
LORD, WHO LIVES AND
REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,
NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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God's work. Our hands.

ⁱ 1st Corinthians 15:16-19

nature . That is how I usually experience the Christmas season.

This year seems different, though. There is a bit of a cloud hanging over our Christmas cheer. For some of us, the parties haven't been as exuberant as in past years. For some of us the shopping hasn't been as carefree – and we haven't been able to do as much as we may be accustomed to doing. For some of us the Christmas vacation plans aren't as extravagant as they may have been. No matter how hard we try to ignore it at least for this one evening, the economic forecast has cast a shadow on what usually is a light and joyful time

Perhaps this year, even more so than in the past couple of years, the power of the Christmas message comes from the details of the story that we often miss. In all reality, the birth of Jesus was probably not quite as peaceful and as serene as we are tempted to imagine it was.

At Christmas time, we remember that Jesus is born into poverty. His parents, Mary and Joseph, travel to Joseph's ancestral home because they are commanded to do so by the emperor. Yet when they arrive, they have neither the resources nor the influence to find a place to stay indoors. So they make their way out back, where all the other homeless people are huddled under a shelter, and there they bed down for the night. At Christmas time, we remember that Jesus was a refugee. When he is born, travelers from the east come to honor him as the Newborn King. But the current king, Herod, finds out, and prompted by a dream, Joseph hits the road again, this time traveling as far as Egypt, out of the reach of King Herod, who is hell bent on putting this child to death before he becomes a legitimate threat. Jesus and his family leave all that is familiar and comforting: their extended families, their home, Joseph's livelihood. Even when the situation back home has calmed down, Joseph and Mary are afraid to return to their hometown, and so they travel down the road 70 miles or so to another town, and resettle there.

Our Christmas cards and nativity sets depict this story as a tender, romantic tale. The birth of a beautiful young child, surrounded by respectful and awestruck onlookers. The reality of his story is quite different, though, isn't it? It is a birth that takes place in the context of fear and danger and uncertainty.

But here's the important thing: even amidst the difficulties Jesus and his family face, they are able to live with hope. Their hope is not based on the certainty of a familiar place that has been their home for generations. Their hope is not based on the family and friends who surround them. Their hope is not based on the expectation that the political powers have chosen to let this baby be. Their hope is not based on the option that even if worse comes to worst, they can always return home. Their hope isn't based on a thoughtful assessment of their situation.

Neither is ours. Our hope is not based on the quality of the Christmas parties we've attended, or the amount of shopping that we were able to do this month, or the lavish nature of the vacations we've got on our calendars. Our hope is not based on the economic strength of our country, or the prospects of the particular company we happen to work for.

The only true hope there is comes from God. God, who promised to be with Mary and Joseph and their child, and through them bring new life to this world; God who watched over them during their travel to Bethlehem, during the birth of their child, and during their flight to Egypt. This same God promises to be with you and with me, in the midst of any fear or danger or uncertainty that we may experience in life.

Some of you know that I have a favorite story about St. Francis – a faithful leader in the church who founded the Franciscan movement in the beginning of the 13th Century. As the story goes, Francis is speaking with some of his brothers in faith, and he asks them to describe what true Christian joy is. They throw out a number of scenarios. "All human pain is eradicated." "No," he says, "that is not true joy." "All unbelievers come to faith in Christ." "No," he says, "that is not true joy." "All Christians join the Franciscan movement." "No," he says, "that is not true joy." Finally, they give up, and St. Francis says: "Let's say that I have been away for a long journey, and I return to the friary late at night on a cold winter's eve. I knock on the door and the brother does not recognize me, so I leave the friary, and go into the town to find lodging, but am unsuccessful. I return to the friary and knock a second time. Again, I am not recognized and turned away, so I make a second trip to town. I find no place to stay, so cold and hungry, I return to the friary, and try again. A

third time I knock on the door, but I am not recognized, and I am not allowed to enter the friary. If, in that moment, I am at peace, that is true Christian joy.”

Francis understands what many in our day fail to perceive. True joy does not come from wealth or comfort or security. True joy does not come from fame or power or success. True joy comes when Jesus, whose birth we celebrate this evening, is born into our lives. True joy comes when our lives are so firmly rooted in the promise of God, that no level of distress or difficulty can overcome us.

I doubt that the first Christmas Day played out quite how young Mary had imagined it in her mind. I suspect that it was a good deal more frightening than she ever thought it could be. But as she treasured the words she heard, and as she pondered them in her heart, she was filled with what the Apostle Paul would eventually call “the peace of God that passes all understanding.”

Tonight we pray that you too might know the peace Mary knew; the peace the Apostle Paul described in his letters. We pray that you too might know the true Christian joy which filled the heart of St. Francis. We pray that as Christ is born anew in your life and in your home, you might know the hope which sustained the Holy Family through the difficult early years of Jesus’ life. We have a God who is not unfamiliar with distress and difficulty, and who offers to be our hope, our joy and our peace, even in the most difficult of times. For that we give thanks tonight.

A merry Christmas to each and every one of you. And as you place your hope and trust in Christ, may the peace of God that surpasses all understanding guide your hearts and your minds in Jesus Christ. ⁱⁱ Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (January 2, 2009)

Gospel Lesson (English): ⁱⁱⁱ

^{2.1} In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ 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. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ 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. ⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ 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: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” ¹⁵ 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.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. ^{iv}

ⁱⁱ Philippians 4:7, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html

^{iv} St. Luke 2:1-20, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

Gospel Lesson (Greek):

2.1 Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐξῆλθεν δόγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος Αὐγούστου ἀπογράφεσθαι πάσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην. 2 αὐτὴ ἀπογραφή πρώτη ἐγένετο ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου. 3 καὶ ἐπορεύοντο πάντες ἀπογράφεσθαι, ἕκαστος εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πόλιν. 4 Ἀνέβη δὲ καὶ Ἰωσήφ ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἐκ πόλεως Ναζαρέθ εἰς τὴν Ἰουδαίαν εἰς πόλιν Δαυὶδ τὴν καλεῖται Βηθλέεμ, διὰ τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν ἐξ οοκου καὶ πατριᾶς Δαυὶδ, 5 ἀπογράψασθαι σὺν Μαριὰμ τῇ ἐμνηστευμένη αὐτῷ, οοση ἐγκύω. 6 Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ ἐπλήσθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ τεκεῖν αὐτήν, 7 καὶ τεκεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς τὸν πρωτότοκον, καὶ ἐσπαργάνωσεν αὐτὸν καὶ ἀνέκλινεν αὐτὸν ἐν φάτνῃ, διότι οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ καταλύματι. 8 Καὶ ποιμένες ἦσαν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῇ αὐτῇ ἀγραυλοῦντες καὶ φυλάσσοντες φυλακὰς τῆς νυκτὸς ἐπὶ τὴν ποιμνὴν αὐτῶν. 9 καὶ γγελος κυρίου ἐπέστη αὐτοῖς καὶ δόξα κυρίου περιέλαμψεν αὐτούς, καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον μέγαν. 10 καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ γγελος μὴ φοβείσθε, ἰδοὺ γὰρ εὐαγγελίζομαι ὑμῖν χαρὰν μεγάλην τὴν ἔσται παντὶ τῷ λαῷ, 11 ὅτι ἐτέχθη ὑμῖν σήμερον σωτὴρ ὅς ἐστιν χριστὸς κύριος ἐν πόλει Δαυὶδ. 12 καὶ τοῦτο ὑμῖν τὸ σημεῖον, εὐρήσετε βρέφος ἐσπαργανωμένον καὶ κείμενον ἐν φάτνῃ. 13 καὶ ἐξαίφνης ἐγένετο σὺν τῷ ἀγγέλῳ πλήθος στρατιᾶς οὐρανόθεν αἰνούντων τὸν θεὸν καὶ λεγόντων 14 δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας. 15 Καὶ ἐγένετο ὡς ἀπῆλθον ἀπ’ αὐτῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν οἱ γγελοὶ, οἱ ποιμένες ἐλάλουν πρὸς ἀλλήλους διέλωμεν δὴ ὡς Βηθλέεμ καὶ δωμεν τὸ ρῆμα τοῦτο τὸ γεγονὸς ὁ κύριος ἐγνώρισεν ἡμῖν. 16 καὶ ἦλθαν σπεύσαντες καὶ ἀνεύραν τὴν τε Μαριὰμ καὶ τὸν Ἰωσήφ καὶ τὸ βρέφος κείμενον ἐν τῇ φάτνῃ 17 ἰδόντες δὲ ἐγνώρισαν περὶ τοῦ ρήματος τοῦ λαληθέντος αὐτοῖς περὶ τοῦ παιδίου τούτου. 18 καὶ πάντες οἱ ἀκούσαντες ἐθαύμασαν περὶ τῶν λαληθέντων ὑπὸ τῶν ποιμένων πρὸς αὐτούς 19 ἡ δὲ Μαριὰμ πάντα συνετήρει τὰ ρήματα ταῦτα συμβάλλουσα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς. 20 καὶ ὑπέστρεψαν οἱ ποιμένες δοξάζοντες καὶ αἰνούντες τὸν θεὸν ἐπὶ πάσιν οἷς κούσαν καὶ εἶδον καθὼς ἐλαλήθη πρὸς αὐτούς.^v

First Lesson (English):

^{9,2} The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. ³ You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴ For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶ For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. ⁸

^v St. Luke 2:1-20, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart)

^{vi} Isaiah 9:2-7, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America)