



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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Liturgical Day: The Wednesday before the Nativity of Our Lord

Date: December 23, 2009

Sermon Title: It's Almost Here

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

It is almost here,. And it seems as though the closer it gets, the farther away it is. When I was a child, we opened gifts on Christmas Eve. Every year it was the same schedule. By mid-afternoon, the house would be filled with the smells of Christmas Eve dinner: Lutefisk, Swedish Meatballs, Rice Pudding, Lingenberries. Mom would be scurrying around the kitchen, while Dad and Uncle Bob and Grandpa watched football in the sun room. Dinner was at about sundown, followed by desert at the table. And then, once the dishes were bussed into the kitchen, we'd move to the front room, gather around the tree, and open our gifts. We kids had an hour or so to play with our newly acquired toys, and then it would be off to church for a late-evening worship service.

Opening those gifts was the focus of our family Christmas celebrations (at least from the perspective of a little boy), more than I care to admit now. And the longest day of the year – well it began right about now. It's as close as I ever came to being Jewish (they consider that a day begins and ends at sunset). The day that went from sunset on December 23 to sunset on December 24 was by far the longest day in the year.

If I'm honest about what was really happening, it really wasn't the toys or the clothes or the oranges (there were always oranges in our Christmas stockings) that made Christmas special. It was the waiting. The longing. The intense focus on that moment when one of the adults would finally say, "Well, let's go into the living room and unwrap presents." The arrival of that moment brought to fruition all that I had imagined, all that I had anticipated, all that I had waited for. The time has arrived.

I like to try and remember what that felt like, whenever I turn my attention to the first twenty verses of Luke's second chapter. By the time this story gets played out on the world stage, it has been maybe 2,000 years since the promise God made to Abraham. It has been maybe 1,000 years since King David sat on the throne of Israel. It has been maybe 500 years since the Prophet Isaiah prophesied that the people who lived in a land of deep darkness would see a great light. All this time the people of God have been waiting, watching, imagining, anticipating... They don't have a precise time, as my brother and sister and I had (seems to me our presents were usually opened about 7:00 p.m.). But they wait, nonetheless, with an even deeper sense of a hope – and after all those years, with an even deeper longing for the day to come.

That is why the message from the angel, and the song from the heavenly host, rock the world of these shepherds the way they do.

- There is good news of great joy for all the people.
- There is born to you, this day a Savior
- This will be the sign: a baby lying in a manger

This baby was not just the heir apparent for the throne of King Herod. He was

the answer to Israel's longing – a longing for God to lead them once again; a longing for the descendant of David to be enthroned; a longing for the promise



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God's work. Our hands.

to Abraham to be fulfilled. That's why the shepherds were terrified at first, but returned to their flocks, glorifying and praising God. That's why all the townspeople who listened to the shepherds were amazed. That's why Mary treasured all these words, and pondered them in her heart. It was the news they had all been aching to hear for generations. It was the answer to all their hopes and dreams.

And it is for us today as well, if we can hear this story with new ears. In the birth of this baby, we too find the answer to our longing; in the birth of this baby, we too discover the depths of God's love; in the birth of this baby, we too are given the gift of peace that can only come from God. As Christ is born into our lives, we too, like those first century shepherds, are transformed by the power of God. Our emptiness gives way to meaning and purpose. Our anxiety gives way to peace and joy. Our terror gives way to shouts of praise and glory. All this as Christ becomes Emmanuel to us – God present with us, and for us. God born among us to bring us forgiveness, and healing, and renewal, and peace and salvation.

At Christmas time, we remember that this baby born in Bethlehem is the fulfillment of what God's people had been awaiting for centuries. We also celebrate that his birth is a sign for us of God's intent to be born in our lives today, coming to us with the comfort and peace and hope and joy that only comes from our faith in Christ.

It's almost here. Advent is almost over. The celebration is about to begin. We're not quite ready to say "Merry Christmas" yet. One long, agonizingly slow Jewish day remains. But as our sense of anticipation rises, may we be as eager as Ancient Israel for Christ to renew the place that he finds at the center of our lives. May it transform us like those shepherds. May it send us home with words of glory and praise on our lips.

It's almost here. Come on back tomorrow, and we'll celebrate together.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 23, 2009)

Gospel Lesson (English): ⁱ

^{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. ⁱⁱ

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

ⁱⁱ 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 πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην. 2 αὐτὴ ἀπογραφή πρώτη ἐγένετο ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηναίου. 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 ἣτις καλεῖται Βηθλέεμ, διὰ τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν ἐξ οοκου καὶ πατριᾶς Δαυὶδ, 5 ἀπογράψασθαι σὺν Μαριὰμ τῇ ἐμνηστευμένῃ 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 τις σται 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 πλῆθος 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 ἴδωμεν τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦτο τὸ γεγονός ὃ 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 ῥήματος 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 ῥήματα ταῦτα συμβάλλουσα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς. 20 καὶ ὑπέστρεψαν οἱ ποιμένες δοξάζοντες καὶ αἰνούντες τὸν θεὸν ἐπὶ πᾶσιν οἷς κούσαν καὶ εἶδον καθὼς ἐλαλήθη πρὸς αὐτούς.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ 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)