



Liturgical Day: The Nativity of Our Lord

Date: December 24, 2009

Sermon Title: Welcome Home

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

Thank you for being part of our worship service this evening at Saint Peter – it is a gift to us for you to be here, especially on a night that is cold as this one. Although I say that with a little hesitation, because it certainly isn't the coldest Christmas night I've experienced. I'll never forget my last Christmas in Minnesota. In 1983 I was home with my parents and brother and sister for our last Christmas together before I became a Pastor. We had been watching the news, and saw that it was going to be a record cold evening that year on Christmas Eve. My dad, being practical and cautious, worried that it was so cold his car might not start after the 11:00 p.m. service – the service we usually attended. So not wanting to deal with that situation, my family decided to go to the 4:00 pm service instead. It was a disappointment for me to miss that late-night service, and to make matters worse, our church was being remodeled so Christmas services were held in the gymnasium that year. Needless to say, the service was a bit less inspiring than what I had hoped for, so after we had our family dinner and unwrapped all of our presents, I decided to walk downtown to the local Episcopal church by myself, and join them for worship. It was a lovely service – really all that I had hoped for. But the surprise came the next morning when I read in the paper that I had walked to church that night when the wind chill was registering about 58 degrees below zero. So I'm glad that you braved the cold and made it to our service tonight, but don't hope for me to be too impressed!

I've had twenty-five Christmas celebrations, now, as a Pastor: twenty-five Christmas Eves away from the family I grew up with. But I still remember what it was like to be welcomed home at Christmas time. My parents were always so gracious – welcoming us three kids home, of course, but also the occasional stray who might wander home with us from college. The people of our congregation, and especially our Pastor, were always so warm – glad to have us back from school, and eager to hear how it was going for us. School friends who attended other colleges and universities, and those who stayed home to start jobs and families, were also glad to see us, and interested to get together and catch up with each other.

The Christmas celebration of my late-teens and early twenties always felt like a time of being welcomed home; a time of remembering how strong and important our roots were; a time of giving thanks for the communities to which we were returning; the communities that meant so much to us.

I hope you feel the same sense of welcome during this year's Christmas celebration. I hope you feel welcomed home, here at Saint Peter. When I say that, the first group of people I think of are those of you who are college students. When Fall Semester begins, you find yourselves spread out from coast to coast. But this evening, many of you are back for one of the first times this year. We are excited to see you. We're eager to find out what you've experienced this fall. And that's why most of you will get mobbed in the narthex by your friends, young and old, after the service. Welcome home, friends, it is great to have you here.

I know there are also some of you here who have finished your time in school, and are experiencing your first year or two in the work force. Whether you live across town, or have travelled to Denver to be with your family this

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.

Christmas, we're glad to have you back with us tonight. Welcome home to you.

But our college-aged worshippers are not the only ones I am thinking about tonight. I'm also aware that on Christmas Eve, we have the chance to worship with some of you who don't join us very often during the rest of the year. Some of you are persuaded to come by family members. Others of you come on your own, for your own reasons. Now I know there is a temptation to feel guilty about being here, or out of place – that somehow, you don't belong, because you are not with us throughout the rest of the year. But tonight we are going to try our hardest to counteract that temptation by embracing you whole-heartedly, and telling you just how glad we are that you've come back again. Welcome home to you, too.

There is another group I'm thinking about tonight: those of you who may be here at worship this evening for the first time in a long while. There are always one or two of you here each year. Sometimes I know who you are, and sometimes I don't. But know this: if you have stepped into this room for the first time in years – or maybe for the first time ever – you are just as welcome here as anyone else. In fact, the reason that we get together here regularly has more to do with you than you might imagine. One of our great hopes as a congregation is have the chance to welcome newcomers into our life together, and into a relationship with God, who has called us here. So I want to say a special "thank you" to you for being here. And even though it may not feel like home here, yet, we welcome you to begin making this your home too.

And lest any of you feel left out, the warm welcome of this Christmas Eve service is extended even to those of you who tend to be here all the time. We have come, again, to this very special night – a night we anticipate for weeks – a night we have prepared for over the past few months – a night when God seems especially near to us – a night when we celebrate the heart of what it means to be a Christian. So if you are like me, and have been longing for this night for some time, welcome home. It is good to have you here.

I am glad to welcome you all home during this service. And this evening's text, one of the best known stories in the Bible, St. Luke's account of the birth of Jesus – this text welcomes you home as well. In this story, Joseph and Mary return to his ancestral home to be registered, after what most people assume was a three or four day walk from Nazareth. During those three or four days, I'm sure Joseph must have imagined what it would be like to be home again – much as you or I might, if we were returning to the home of our parents, many years after we were last there. Perhaps he thought of cousins and aunts and uncles, some of whom he hadn't seen for years, who would welcome him, and rejoice with him at meeting his new bride, and awaiting the birth of his new child. As you certainly know, when they arrive, they don't exactly receive a warm welcome home. Instead, they are told there is no room inside for them, and they are instructed to bed down for the night outside, with the animals.

Mary and Joseph may not have been warmly welcomed home by his side of the family on that dark, cold Christmas Eve night. The relatives and the others who lived in Bethlehem may not have made room for them in their homes (or their hearts, for that matter). But this humble couple did some welcoming of their own. They welcomed into their lives a newborn baby that night; born of strange and troubling circumstances, but born as a sign of hope from God. And they welcomed into that stable a group of shepherds who had been keeping watch over their flocks in the fields. These shepherds, informed by an angel from God that the Savior had been born in Bethlehem, came to honor him. We've talked about these shepherds this past month during worship, and we've remembered that they were not exactly the pillars of society in first century Bethlehem. Shepherds were outcasts – poorly behaved, badly smelling, ill mannered men who were much more at home sleeping under the stars than gathering with polite company. Yet Mary and Joseph welcomed them into their midst on the night that Christ was born. It was to these shepherds that the first announcement of the Messiah's birth was made. That was God's way of saying that all are welcome.

In verses ten and eleven we read the content of that announcement. In it, the angel declares that this Savior has been born for all the world. It is to you, the angel says to these shepherds, that the Messiah is born in Bethlehem. It is a sign for you, the angel says, that you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth. To those whom the world has all but rejected, the angel comes and offers a warm and enthusiastic welcome home. Welcome home to the promise of the Messiah. Welcome home to God's grace. Welcome home to the message that God loves you enough to be born for you and to die for you. Welcome home to the community of

strangers who first received this announcement, and who shared the honor of gathering around him at the manger.

In a perfect world, Jesus would most likely have been born in the warmth and safety of a familiar home – behind doors that had been securely locked to keep just these kinds of vagrants out. But we don't live in a perfect world. We live in the real world. The real world where God took the risk of being born among us. The real world where welcomes are not always as warm and genuine as they ought to be. The real world where a humble young couple could not find room indoors to lie down and rest. The real world where those who are less-than-perfect – outcast shepherds – even people like you and me – are warmly welcomed and lovingly embraced.

Welcome home, friends, to the message of Christmas. Welcome home, friends, to a God who loves you deeply. Welcome home, friends, to the good news that no matter where you've been, or how long you've been gone, God is pleased to have you back again. In the words of this evening's Gospel lesson, there is the message of welcome home for each and every one of you. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. For you a child has been born; a son has been given. If you hear nothing else this Christmas season, I hope you will hear this: that God loves you deeply, and in the birth of this Baby in Bethlehem, announces the good news that through faith in this Newborn King, we are all welcomed into that love.

Merry Christmas everybody. Welcome home. It is good to have you here. Let's join our hearts in a song of praise. The song of the angels is printed on page 5 of your worship folders. Please stand with us, as we join those angels in raising our voices in praise to God, for the birth of Christ among us and within us.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 25, 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 αὕτη 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 ἣτις 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 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 οὐρανίου 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 διέλθωμεν δὴ ὡς Βηθλέεμ καὶ ἴδωμεν τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦτο τὸ γεγονός ὃ κύριος ἐγνώρισεν ἡμῖν. 16 καὶ ἦλθον 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

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. ^{iv}

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)

^{iv} 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)