

Isaiah 52:7-10

Luke 2:8-20

December 25, 2009

This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page at Trinity Lutheran Church

## “Joy in the original Christmas program”

It often poses a challenge to take in the grand nature of the stories throughout the holy scriptures.

In the book of Genesis, God commands the darkness and light to go their separate ways, informs the seas to their areas while lifting up massive continents from the formless earth.

In the book of Exodus, hundreds, even thousands of Egyptian soldiers are rushing to capture escaping Hebrew slaves led by Moses. This journey takes them to a section of dry land in the sea. In an instant, the charioteers and the horses are consumed by massive walls of water that crash down on them. Horsemen are thrown from their mounts. They are killed instantly or die by drowning...the eyes of the horses are wide open in fear before they perish.

The book of Revelation gives us a vision of the saints in heaven being gathered in a multitude greater than the eye can see. There a seas of faces and white robes beyond what the mind can comprehend as they join in singing, “Holy, holy, holy to the Lord God Almighty.”

Amid these few examples of the grand nature of Biblical stories relative to the divine...we encounter these well-known words from the gospel of Luke. Words that have transcended the ages. Words that have changed lives. Words that though comforting, can threaten us with the grand nature of its scope.

Words that show us a God that is grand, compassionate, and small...

Perhaps by now you have eaten some of those Christmas cookies, opened a gift or two, and received cards of love from family members and friends. In addition, you may have attended a Christmas program involving your child or grandchild. We are all aware that such programs abound in churches throughout the world.

Young children, either reluctantly or willing, put on their costumes and assume the role of a Biblical character from the grand drama that is the second chapter of the gospel of Luke.

There’s the shy Mary wearing the faded blue gown sitting on a small stool in the center of the stage. Next to her is Joseph with his wig and beard on...perhaps wearing his old sneakers under his robe. The kings on stage left are adorned in gold colored garb with a toy crown. They are carrying what looks to be grandpa’s old cigar box with grandma’s old jewelry inside.

Then there’s the angels with halos slightly off center standing to left, the innkeeper is

there, the shepherds with their long staffs are in the right, and there's the occasional cardboard donkey or other farm animal that was painted by the Sunday school teachers.

All are gathered around a blanket wrapped doll in an old looking wooden crèche made by a church member years ago.

Adults eat this stuff up. Parents sit with their smiles of pride, cameras in hand and video cameras capturing every moment. They took on such roles when they were children and now they bask in the joy of seeing their child taking on a part as well. Sure, there's the uncertainty and worry over their child picking their nose or crying in fear in front of everyone. Yet, overall, there is joy in it all.

Compared to the original...these pageants fall far short in comparison.

Whatever it is that we try and do to convey the grand and majestic nature of what happened to those unknown shepherds in a far off land are weak and small. The majestic light of the stars that first Christmas evening come down to the flicker of a candle. The entire scene is often reduced to the size of a hallmark card.

As Ann Dillard, in her book, Teaching a Stone to Walk, wrote,

"... if you send any shepherds a Christmas card on which is printed a three-by-three photograph of the angel of the Lord, the glory of the Lord, and a multitude of the heavenly host, they will not be sore afraid."

The Christmas programs are over...the costumes tucked away for another year along with the makeshift manger. The straw is cleaned up and there is perhaps relief that another year's Christmas program has gone by flawlessly.

When we step away for a moment, to seize the silence of Christmas, we will see something unique...the original Christmas program. In it we see something we likely did not notice in all our years of hearing this story from Luke 2. That something is where Luke focuses his attention in that first Christmas program.

How did Mary feel? We don't know.

What did the angels look like? How many angels were there? We don't know.

What did the newborn savior look like? Did he have a lot of hair? Was he pudgy? We don't know.

The shepherds...Luke focuses on the shepherds...the lowly, peasant ranking shepherds off in the distance, sitting on the darkened hills. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and they were terrified.

This year, we may feel like the shepherds, sitting far off from God in a darkness brought upon on by another or one that is self-imposed.

In looking back on this past year, even this past decade, we may have experience darkness on various levels.

September 11<sup>th</sup>

Hurricane Katrina

War in Iraq and Afghanistan

Economic peril with the recession  
H1N1 shed light on the health care debate

We may sit today waiting, even wanting, to be surprised by the divine, to hear a message of hope that will bring us a sense of comfort and release from what we have experienced.

The shepherds venture forth with haste, they hurried to Bethlehem. They saw the holy family and went out rejoicing, telling others about what they had seen. Others were amazed at what they heard. Mary pondered everything in her heart.

Therein lies the power of Christ's birth. The power pervades the scene but we, as witnesses, join with others who were not present to see the Christ child. Join with Martin Luther, Michaelangelo, Saint Augustine, and previous loved ones who have heard these words in the past.

It is in not being present that the power of Christ's birth can be dampened, hindered, and lost. We have witnessed how this season is a tug-of-war between commercialized pursuits, between saying 'Happy Holidays' or 'Merry Christmas', and going back to the regular routine of life after this once a year aura has passed. The Christmas lights are turned off, the decorations are put back in boxes, and the long cold winter continues.

It is then that the challenge comes...the challenge for us to nurture our faith, prioritize our schedules, and to make room for Christ's presence each day. To make room for forgiveness to occur; to make room for the less fortunate; to make room for Christ...in prayer, silence, and worship.

To do so...when everything of this day is packed away. What will we do with this gift...the birth of Christ that we celebrate today?

Mother Teresa. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. My grandparents, Bennie and Myrtle Nelson. Individuals who have inspired me in my walk of faith.

Who are those people in your life who have helped nurture your faith? We all have them. We need to recognize them and give thanks for such people that God brings into our lives.

Since, it is by those people, that we see the blessed presence of Christ not directly, but indirectly through the lives of others. The shepherd's multiplied the grand nature of Christ's birth by bringing into their heart, soul, and mind by allowing it to shape their lives...

Praising God for what they have been given.

Praising God for a promise fulfilled.

Praising God that this Savior, the one who created the heavens and the earth, the one who could divide the sea...had come to earth...and rests in a feeding trough as a baby.

Indeed, a baby fails in comparison to the grand nature of God.

Yet, then again, the grand nature of God is changed to be held in a presence that is so

small and so dependent...that we see God's love by God becoming like us.

It is through us...that the presence of God is seen by others.

We are the shepherds on the hill with a responsibility to live out and share this blessed message each day.

It was Christmas Eve, 1914. It was World War I. German troops began decorating the areas around the trenches in the region of Ypres, Belgium. They placed candles on trees and even sang Christmas carols...most notably Silent Night. The British troops across from them in the distance began to sing English carols.

They continued by shouting Christmas greetings to each other. Eventually, there were calls to visit across the "No Man's Land" ...the vast field between their trenches. While visiting each other between their trenches, the exchanged gifts of whisky, jam, cigars, chocolate, and other things. They even exchanged home addresses. This also allowed recently fallen soldiers to be properly buried behind their lines. Both parties paid their respects to those who had died.

In many areas, the truce lasted through Christmas night. Some even extended through New Years Day.

The gospel writer, Luke, invites us to treasure these words of Christ's birth.

He invites us to take in and be in awe of God's faithfulness to us to come.

And he gathers us around the hope and possibilities in where these words will lead us, and the world, in the days and years to come.

The grand nature of the divine is with us;

Resting in our hearts;

Guiding our lives;

And leading us to share God's presence in all that we do.

Join we me in prayer...these are the words of Martin Luther's Christmas Prayer. Jesus, our Savior, as we stand in spirit at your lowly manger, we bow our knees in reverent worship of that mystery without controversy great, revealed in your birth in Bethlehem's stable. O Jesus, teach us to believe what reason cannot comprehend and with childlike faith accept this mystery which no created mind can fully understand.

We joyfully praise your love and grace. You have left your Father's home. For me.

You have taken the sins of the world upon yourself. For me.

You are willing to fulfill all righteousness. For me.

As your love has drawn you from heaven to earth, so let your love draw me from earth to heaven to your in time and eternity.

Amen.

