

## **SERMON “A CHRISTMAS SURPRISE—STRAIGHT TO BETHLEHEM”**

(Luke 2:1-20 Preached at Christmas Eve Service December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you...especially peace on this night of our Savior's birth. Amen. Well, the time has finally arrived. Our days of watching and waiting and preparing are finally over—and tonight the celebration begins. If it's not purchased or packed or wrapped or baked or decorated or hemmed or mailed by now, it's probably not going to be, so give it a rest. Let's set all those details aside for tonight and let us truly rejoice! As we gather as one congregation in Jesus Christ, let's consider the event that changed the course of human history forever—that event is Christmas! And my prayer tonight is that Jesus will be born in us, and live in us, and be our reason for living, and loving and caring and giving every day of our lives.

Now, having said that, I know that this is also a night of surprises. In fact, I think that's a word that best describes Christmas in this modern day. Packages under the tree or stowed away in a closet or under the bed—hold surprises that wait to be unwrapped. Family and friends will travel great distances and show up at our homes unexpectedly. “Surprise!” they will say when we open the door. One man approached the clerk at Sachs Fifth Ave. in NY city and asked for a small bottle of expensive perfume for his wife. “Is it a surprise?” the clerk asked. “Yes” the man said— “she's expecting a trip to Hawaii!”

Friends, Christmas is all about surprise. When the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would conceive and bear a son, and he would be the Savior of the world, Mary was surprised. “How can this be?” she asked the messenger. When Joseph was told that his fiancée was pregnant, Joseph was very surprised as well as shocked and angry—until the angel told him the rest of the story. Elizabeth and Zacharias were astonished when Elizabeth got pregnant as an elderly woman. Then the angel announced that their child would usher in news of the Messiah, for whom the world had waited for a thousand years.

But I am here tonight to tell you that nobody was more surprised than the shepherds near Bethlehem, when angels appeared to them and announced the birth of the Son of God. They were shepherds, after all. Uneducated, irreligious, uncouth and unlikely, but it was to them that the news first came. “Do not be afraid” the angel said, but of course they were afraid; they were terrified; in fact, the shepherds might have collapsed and hugged the ground in fear—But the angel persisted. “Don't be afraid, for I bring you

good news of great joy, which shall be for all the people. For unto you this day in the City of David there has born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

What happened next is a marvelous miracle, one of many that happened on that first Christmas night. When the angels departed from them, the shepherds said to one another “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing which the angel has made known to us.” And they went! The shepherds actually went! Scripture says that the shepherds went with haste to Bethlehem and found it just as it had been told them.

But that’s because they were shepherds. They didn’t stop to consider the economic impact, they didn’t take a poll, or call in consultants, form a committee, or request more information from the angel. They just went and with great haste— Immediately and they found it exactly as the angel had said.

But what does all of this mean to us, some 2000 years removed from that holy night? In an age when shepherds have all but disappeared from our world— an age when the town of Bethlehem is an epicenter of conflict and bitterness, and when we seem to do everything “with haste” except consider whether there is any room for Jesus in our lives.

What does it all mean to us today—in this present age? I’d like to share three thoughts with you to answer this question. The first is that Jesus still wants to come into the lives of the plain and ordinary people of this world. Shepherds were not rocket scientists! They weren’t Sunday School teachers, or Nobel Prize winners, or Lutheran pastors. They were plain, common folk, whose lives were filled with menial tasks and significant challenges, and often, they were just trying to survive.

People, we have met the shepherds and they are us. Nothing special. Nothing extraordinary, but chosen by God to receive the greatest surprise gift ever given. “This very night, a Savior has been born, for you.” As I look out tonight at all our sister congregations gathered here tonight, I know for a fact that there are many in our midst whose lives are hard. You wonder where your life is headed. You wonder if anything you do counts for anything. You wonder if God hears your prayers. Welcome to the guild of shepherds my friend. A Savior has been born for you tonight.

The second this has to do with fear. “Do not be afraid” the angel said. Well, easier said than done. Rumors and threats of all kinds are a commonplace event in our daily lives—

in a hospital you might hear “code orange or code blue.” Fear and anxiety strike when a loved one faces illness. When money is short, when hope is fading, when relationships are strained or fail—when the world could go up in nuclear smoke—to be afraid is to be human. To simply say “Don’t be afraid” doesn’t cut it!

But listen to what the angel actually said. “Don’t be afraid, for I bring you good news a great joy— a Savior has been born for you.” God is here, in this fractured, hurting and broken world. Emmanuel, God is with us in the dark nights and the hopeless situations. God promises never to abandon us, and more than that, God has promised that because of Jesus, we will live forever. His love will deal with the business with our fear!

And the final thought is this— the shepherds actually went to Bethlehem. They didn’t have to go. The angels didn’t command it—God didn’t require it. But the invitation was offered. “This shall be a sign for you; a baby, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” The shepherds went straight to Bethlehem, not to see if it was true, but because they believed it was. They knew that the world had suddenly changed and they wanted to celebrate that fact. And I think that’s why we are here today, most of us, at least.

Some may have come because your parents made you, or your spouse required you, or your children persuaded you to take them so you wouldn’t feel guilty. That’s okay; we’re just glad you’re here! But most have come because, like the shepherds, you believe the message of the angels. A Savior has been born—this is long expected Messiah, the holy child who will bridge the gap between a sinful world and a gracious God.

So, we have all come. God has touched us with a promise that has taken root in our hearts, souls, and minds. Even though we are all ordinary and broken people as the first sinful shepherds! Surprise! A Savior has been born for us—what a GREAT SURPRISE! We all have a reason to celebrate! Thanks be to God. Merry Christmas to us all! Amen!