

The Nativity of Our Lord — Christmas Eve
December 24, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Luke 2:1-20 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. **2** (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) **3** And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. **5** He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, **7** and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. **9** An angel of the Lord appeared to 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. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. **11** Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. **19** But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

"Christmas Joy Comes from Jesus"

To us a child is born, to us a son is given. Amen.

To be Christmas we all want certain things to happen. Snow would be nice. But it's probably not going to happen. You have to have a Christmas tree. Or maybe your home has five Christmas trees. Lights are a key ingredient. And you can debate whether those lights should just be white or multi-colored. Decorations have to be there. Either simple and sensible or the more and bigger the better. If is inflatable, animatronic or might induce seizures in passing motorists, you have to have that decoration. You have to be near family. Or you have to enjoy the day with your closest loved ones. Grandma's cookies have to be made according to the time-honored recipe. Or you have to just save yourself loads of stress by peeling back the cellophane on the ones from Wall-Mart.

We all want certain parts of our celebration to go according to plan. We even demand them. And it's because we're looking for the things around us and all those experiences to give us that certain feeling that is non-negotiable for Christmas. We all want Christmas joy.

And then we take a look at the authentic scenes of the original Christmas. And things don't seem even close to perfect from our perspective. Mary and Joseph are uprooted from their home town so they can take a three day donkey ride. The whims of a far-off ruler dictate their travel plans. Joseph may have chosen to bring Mary to shielded her from shame and ridicule of wagging tongues calculating the conception timing of the baby she is carrying. No hospitality from distant relatives once they arrive in Bethlehem. So they settle for a far cry from sterile environment for labor and delivery. Probably not the peaceful glow surrounding this couple depicted in Christmas cards. And yet, this is how God chose to deliver Christmas joy.

Maybe this more realistic Jesus is more at home in the gritty existence in which we find ourselves. Whether it is reports of criminal activities or new reports of sexual misconduct or bickering politicians this gritty, realistic world gets us ready for the joy Jesus brings at Christmas.

Here's why. The Bible's actual account of the birth of Jesus is pretty simple and straightforward: **"While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them."** (Luke 2:6,7) We don't get a lot of details. We aren't privileged with a play-by-play of the labor and delivery. We don't even know for sure where the birth took place. We just get a few hints. Like the feeding trough for a cradle leading us to believe Jesus was born in a barn. The only 100% guarantee is the absolutely humble nature of the birth of Jesus.

But let's peer a little closer to see something more than mere humility. That's when we see Jesus wrapped up. This isn't just about decorating the best Christmas ornament. It means Jesus is an actual baby. God's own Son needed the security and comfort that comes from being wrapped up nice and tight. Jesus is vulnerable and fragile. He needed protection. Today some babies get carried around on a cradle board. Others get transported in trendy Scandinavian pouches. But this scene of Jesus wrapped up tight and confined to a manger is an admission of his own helplessness at that phase in his life.

You may have graduated from that phase of your life, but you still know what it means to be bound and confined, to require comfort and security. You know what it means to be too young to set your own bed time or be trusted to be alone in the kitchen with knives. You might also know how much more fragile your body feels as you age and your eyesight grows worse and your hearing fades. You feel the limitations of relationships that wrap you up in all sorts of grief and heartache. Relationships that make you feel like you can't get out, like you have no options. You know the sting of feeling confined by forces outside your control. Your work dictates what you do and when you do it. Someone at corporate decides you are needed 500 miles away or shareholders sell off your division to increase their

profits. Politicians seem more interested in pandering than finding real solutions for the people who depend on them.

On Christmas we celebrate a Jesus who came down to earth. Jesus shares our humanity. Jesus takes on our vulnerability. And yet Jesus becomes a source of joy for every human heart because his life was designed to be more than ours.

The first people who hear the news of Jesus don't initially react the way we would expect them to: **"An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified."** (Luke 2:9) The shepherds are gripped with fear. And this is actually the most sensible reaction when one of God's ambassadors makes a personal visit. See, we typically think of God coming near to us as a good thing. If God is at our side, he can teach and guide, instruct and model what we need to do. But whether they come to Joseph (Matthew 1:2) or Zechariah the father of John the Baptist (Luke 1:13) or even Mary (Luke 1:30), angels consistently have to reassure and comfort. "Fear not" or "stop being afraid" are among the first things out of the mouths of these heaven-sent messengers.

Fear is the opposite of how we should feel on Christmas. But our humanness also means carrying around with us legitimate fears. Fear comes from the brokenness we experience. Not just from our broken bodies, but the way we have repeatedly broken our trust with God. Fear comes from separation. Not just feeling separated in relationships, but feeling the deep rift that exists between me and God. Because of human flesh, we can try harder and exert greater effort. But the more energy I extend into trying to satisfy God the worse I end up fooling myself. My humanness means I feel the sting of coming to realize I might be better than lots of people, even possibly better than most people, but then coming to grips with the fact that I can't fool God. And so I have to wrestle with the fear of God knowing who I really am. I know that some day I will stand, not in the glow of angels, but before the all-seeing eye of God. And I know the fear of feeling helpless to offer any defense or claim of innocence before God.

But that's not why Jesus came. Jesus didn't come to increase your fear. He came to erase it. The angels spoke to the shepherds what they also say to you: **"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."** (Luke 2:10) God wrapped up in human flesh came for you. Jesus came to end all fear. Jesus did not come to give you guidance or instruction how to perform better. Jesus didn't come mainly to teach or model how you could be more like him. Turning Jesus into an example who shows us how to do what he did only trades one form of fear for another. One variety of fear gets knocked down by his coming, only to be replaced by a more intimidating, impossible to get rid of kind of fear.

The angel announces what Jesus came to do: **"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."** (Luke 2:11) Christmas joy comes from Jesus. God himself is present in our world. But this is God himself who comes to save you.

At Christmas, some of our greatest stresses come from depending on forces outside our control. We trust the gifts we ordered will be delivered on time. We pray for good weather so we can travel to see loved ones. It's a helpless feeling. But helplessness at Christmas is the key to Christmas joy. Christmas teaches us to depend on Jesus as our Savior. Complete dependence on Jesus gives Christmas joy.

Jesus left his throne in heaven so he could be here for you. Jesus came in the flesh so he could do what no other human being has been able to do or will be able to do. Jesus came to place himself under God's standard of perfection and then come out squeaky clean in the end. Jesus came to earth with the full knowledge of what we demanded of him and yet he volunteered for it. Jesus came to Bethlehem and was placed in that manger knowing his entire life and ministry would end on a cross. Jesus knew taking human flesh and blood would enable him to be your sacrifice. His cross would be the only solution for you to escape the fear of God's judgment. Jesus came in human flesh to give you hope. Your peace and joy depend on Jesus. Christmas joy comes from Jesus.

After Christmas presents are opened, we have other expectations. Relax with some tasty food. Enjoy a game with family. Catch up with relatives you haven't seen for a while. Watch a classic Christmas movie. We know how those favorite movies end. But we watch them anyway so we can remember and enjoy them all over again.

Focus on the reaction of the shepherds to the birth of Jesus. At first they were gripped with fear at the sight of the angel. But they were transformed with joy when they got to see Jesus: **"So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child."** (Luke 2:16,17) They saw Jesus and received joy. So they had to make it known. Those who heard the news from the shepherds had a different reaction: **"and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."** (Luke 2:18) They heard and were filled with amazement. Even Mary took it all in: **"But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."** (Luke 2:19) Mary pondered it all and considered its meaning and reflected on it. She preserved it deep inside.

God in the flesh on Christmas means God's promises to you are all kept in Jesus. And promises kept mean Jesus is still here for you. Jesus is here for you in your brokenness to give you his healing. Jesus is here for you in your strained relationships to give you peace with God. Jesus is here with you in your heartache to bring you joy of salvation. Jesus has secured your eternity by his life and death and resurrection. So he is also here for you now to bring joy in this sometimes grim and gritty world.

When the decorations come down, when the presents are gone, when the goodies are devoured, we will still have joy in Jesus. God in the flesh in the person of Jesus means the song of the angels still rings when Christmas fades far from our memories. Tomorrow and the next day and next month you can still sing: **"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."** (Luke 2:14) Jesus brings glory in heaven because he sent in motion God's eternal rescue plan. Peace on earth because Jesus

has done everything necessary to gift you salvation. God's favor rests on you because Jesus came to save all people. The birth of Jesus means God loves all humanity and wants you to have joy and peace through Jesus. Christmas joy comes from Jesus. Amen.

+ To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father — to him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen. +