



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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Christmas Day

December 25, 2013

“The Hopes and Fears of all the Years”

(John 1:11-13)

Rev. David K. Groth

“He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:11-13).

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, grant that the birth of Your only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free from the bondage of sin; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

Many of your nativity sets at home are simple affairs: Jesus lying in a manger. Mary and Joseph on either side, and that's it. It's very clean and compact, easy to put out and pack away.

Other nativity sets are the opposite of all that. We saw one of them in a museum in Madrid. It could have filled up a two car garage, and it made little Bethlehem look like the Chicago World's Fair. There were hundreds of figurines. Of course the Holy Family was there, surrounded by a half dozen shepherds all craning their necks to get a good look. There were the requisite sheep scattered about and the obligatory ox and donkey, some free range chickens and lots and lots of angels hanging around. The wise men were kneeling, presenting their gifts, their camels tethered to a stand of palm trees. There were a few Pharisees frowning on the whole thing. But what I found most interesting were those others on the margins of the scene, not so focused on the Christ Child. In fact, they weren't paying any attention. They were busily engaged in life, completely oblivious to what was happening right down the block from them. There were some women washing clothes in a tub, and vendors selling olives in the market place, farmers plowing their fields. To them that day was no different than any other. Imagine, God was fulfilling an ancient promise and doing a remarkable and new thing right there in their own town, and they missed it entirely. Can you hear the teenagers in Bethlehem 2000 years ago? "Nothing ever happens in this dumpy little town!"

Some manger scenes are crowded affairs, but I suspect for the most part the original was rather quiet, lonely even, because most people had no idea what a remarkable thing God was doing in their little town. It's a guess, but I suspect there were long periods of time when the only people there were Mary and Joseph and the baby, troubled, confused, afraid. . . lonely even. They have no money. Little hospitality has been shown them.

To the innkeeper Joseph and Mary and their baby are just customers that he lost because he had no room. To Herod, Jesus was a potential threat to his authority. To the religious authorities, Jesus was a potential imposter and blasphemer. To the townspeople, he was simply an infant born at an unfortunate time and place.

They all missed it. It happened right underneath their noses, and

they all missed it. Then and now, it's so easy to miss. Then and now, God's gifts are given so quietly and without pretense. A baby in a manger in an out of the way town called Bethlehem in an out of the way province called Judah. Today he still gives his gifts quietly and without pretense: three handfuls of water over there . . . in pennies worth of bread and wine over here . . . and stumbling speech over here. "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given."

As an infant, he looked just like any other infant. But no one else was up for the task of saving his people from their sins. No one else could be without fault or defect, but holy, undefiled. No one else could be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The responsibility, the mission was his and his alone. No one else could wage war on the old evil foe . . . and win. No one else could be obedient unto death, even death on a cross. No one else could, by his own power, rise from the dead. Not Mary. Not an angel. Not Moses. Not Muhammad or Confucius or any other god or prophet. The world had no other alternatives. The responsibility was his alone. That's why when we set up our manger scenes, we usually have everyone looking at the infant, because deep down we know he's the only one who can save us. There is no Plan B. "Name him Jesus", the angel of the Lord commanded Joseph, "for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1:21).

And that's why in some of those expansive manger scenes, where people are doing laundry and plowing fields and haggling over the price of olives . . . it just seems so wrong and so sad, but probably a good bit of truth to it. The world's biggest and best news foretold by the prophets centuries before . . . and they missed it.

When Abraham Lincoln was delivering the Gettysburg Address, everyone was expecting a rather long winded speech. But Lincoln's actual address was less than 270 words. They were still setting up their equipment as Lincoln wrapped up his speech. There are a couple of grainy photographs however. There's one showing people crowding around him. You can just make out his signature beard and top hat. But there's one guy in the foreground who's not looking at Lincoln. In fact his back is facing Lincoln, and he's looking at the camera instead. The most famous speech in our country's history, and that guy missed it because he was distracted by one of those new fangled cameras! I wonder what he told his grandchildren: "Yep, I was there. Don't remember a word of it."

Don't let that happen to you. It's not too late. Don't let all the fuss distract you from Christ this day. "For unto you was born this day a Savior." It's the Savior lying in a manger, *your* Savior from sin and death.

That is, we need to keep Good Friday in mind even on Christmas Day, because Christ could be born a thousand times, and it wouldn't do us a bit of good, until he goes once to the cross for us. In anticipation of that day, Jesus said, "Greater love has no man than this: that he lay down his life for

his friends” (Jn. 15:13). That’s what he did. That’s ultimately what we are celebrating today: not just any old birth, but the birth of our Savior from sin and death.

If we are distracted by the things of the world, he was not. He stayed true to his mission and zeroed in on our needs, not his own. He focused on our salvation and our welfare, not his own.

So if only for a moment, turn your eyes away from the sweet manger scene and fix them upon the cross and the one dangling from it. If only for a moment turn your ears away from soft, pleasant carols and let them hear his last rattling gasp for air. Our salvation wasn’t won when he started breathing, but when he stopped. On him alone was the crushing weight of the world’s sin. Abandoned by his friends, cursed by his enemies, even forsaken by the Father. The small voice that cried from the manger would also cry from the cross, “Father, forgive them.” That’s why this baby was born, not so Mary could lull him to sleep in a manger, but so the soldiers could put him to death on a cross.

Maybe something we could all do this day is take our bibles into a closet or bathroom and lock ourselves in and again for ourselves read the account of Jesus’ birth from Matthew 1 or Luke 2.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor imprisoned by the Nazis during WW II and eventually executed for treason, wrote a note to his parents on December 17, 1943. “For a Christian” he writes, “there is nothing particularly difficult about Christmas in a prison cell. I dare say for many people in this prison it will probably be a more sincere and genuine occasion than in places where nothing but the name is kept. . . That Christ was born is something a prisoner can understand better than other people; for him it is really good news. . . No doubt it will be a very quiet Christmas. . . but it may perhaps bring home to some people here for the first time what Christmas really is.”

2,000 years ago, it happened right underneath their noses, and most of the people of Bethlehem missed it. They went on washing their clothes and plowing their fields and selling their product. Don’t let that happen to you today. Hear the Good News. This one was born for you . . . and for your salvation. John wrote, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” That’s what you are. That’s what he has made you to be through baptism and faith: a Child of God.

So whoever you are, whatever your background, however busy and distracted you are, whatever your achievements or failures, no matter how great your sin . . . you are first and foremost a child of God. And as a child, also an heir . . . an heir of all the gifts the heavenly Father wants to give. Amen.