

Christmas Eve – 2024

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

We are all shepherds tonight. You should very well be able to imagine being in the fields, keeping watch over your flock by night and having the message of the Gospel come to your ears. You are suburban people and the birth of our Lord is in a rustic setting but you are the direct kin of those shepherds. You may not be able to tell a sheep from a goat but we are all shepherds tonight. I've never seen an angel but those shepherds and I are comrades – we are cut from the same cloth. We have received a revelation of God's glory, God's love, God's action.

God's Son was born of a virgin. This is Immanuel, the Promised Savior, the divine Seed of the Woman. The Almighty dispatches His messengers, angels, to proclaim the wonder of this birth. They don't venture to the halls of power. The angels aren't sent to the seat of government or to the exceptionally wealthy or the sleekly fashionable. They are sent to shepherds. Angels are sent to shepherds outside of a small village, Bethlehem, to proclaim the Gospel, a timeless revelation of God's glory. Angels; they are familiar with the Son of God. In heaven, angels always see His face (Matthew 18:10). Angels know that the eternal Son of the eternal Father is their Creator. They know God's power, His wisdom, His beauty, His goodness, His immensity – and now they know that very Son is veiled in flesh, humble and lying in a manger. A mystery! A mystery of the highest order! Are you familiar with mystery? The origin of life; how God creates out of nothing by the power of His Word; He speaks and it is done. Now that eternal Word, the Logos, is born of a virgin. Glory to God in the highest!

The words of angels hit shepherds ears. God has come! The Messiah that we have long hoped for is here! And they run! St. Luke says that they went with haste. They ran! Were there obstacles? Did it matter? Do you get the sense that the shepherds would've hazarded any obstacle to find this baby? We are all shepherds. That sweet Word of Christ's arrival burns in *your* heart. God's glory, hidden yet present, hidden yet prehensible, animates the eyes of your heart. What obstacles have you overcome? To be where Christ is, to be in His presence, to receive His gifts and participate in His life... what obstacles have you overcome? Who is at work in you that you remain close to Him? (Philippians 2:13). Oh, you are shepherds. You find Him where He has promised to be found. God has ensured it. The message of God's grace has captured you, creating faith, enlarging your life, setting you on the course to heaven. God's Word does what it says.

Some time ago my beloved bride bought me some cologne. It smelled really good. The name of the cologne was "Really Ripped Abs." Genius marketing met a hopeful consumer and that consumer gave me a bottle of "Really Ripped Abs." I put it on daily. A few weeks later I was mowing the lawn, it was hot. After a long day in the yard I came into the laundry room and removed a sweaty shirt on my way to the shower and Alise walked in, looked at me and her face fell. She said: "Aw, it doesn't work." God doesn't need genius marketing. His Word does what it says. A messenger, a holy angel, the Angel Gabriel came to Mary and announced the Gospel. "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne

of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will no end” (Luke 1:31-33). Mary believed. Mary believed the angel, believed the Gospel, believed God’s Word. And she conceived. The power of the Most High overshadowed her and she conceived. God’s Son, through the Holy Spirit, was conceived in Mary as she believed. Through her ear, Mary conceived. Martin Luther said that. Aurally, Mary heard the Word and God was with us. His throne was her womb. What a mystery! God’s Word does what it says.

Why? Why is this monumental movement toward sinful man needed? What prompts this love, this venture? Another woman, the first woman, had an angel come to her. This was a fallen angel, full of hate, full of pride, full of violence. Satan tempted Eve. Eve heard demonic lies and she acted on them. Adam ate and sin took humanity prisoner. You are an heir of Adam. You are an heir of Eve. Death was unleashed and has ravaged God’s good creation. Death is an obstacle. God is a God life. He is living and life-giving. About Jesus, St. John wrote this: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4). Do you know what it is to sit in darkness? Guilt, shame, fear, doubt – these darken our soul. Sin darkens our soul. Do you know what it is to sit in darkness? It’s not just you. It is us, it’s humanity, it’s all the daughters of Eve and all the sons of Adam. Isaiah the prophet announced it and Matthew pronounced its fulfillment: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Isaiah 9:2; Matthew 4:16). Light for your soul; the Light of Christ has come (John 8:12). In Him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). The Gospel binds us to Him, binds us to His person, His light (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The Lord Christ is familiar with obstacles. Satan’s temptations – He faced that, triumphed over that. Disease – the incarnate King of Creation healed the sick, cured the leprous, gave sight to the blind. Jesus overcomes obstacles. A storm could not keep Him from walking to His disciples as they labored on a tempestuous sea. The disciples thought that He was a ghost, but it was the very real man who is also true God who strides the waves, overcoming obstacles to make His way to us. Judas was an obstacle. Herod, Pilate, even St. Peter at one point was an obstacle. “Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me to drink?” (John 18:11). It sounds innocuous but it was a horrific cup. Horrific! Sin and death, all of it, that is the cup which the Son of God came to drink. All power is vested in this Messiah and He lays it aside to be humiliated. Shame; He is mocked and tortured. Love pours itself out in suffering. Your guilt was put on Him and He endures the Father’s wrath. No obstacle stops us from celebrating this night only because no obstacle kept the Lord from His throne, His cross. His holiness, His righteousness vanquished every obstacle that sets itself up between us and our Creator. In faith, that is what the shepherds saw as they looked at baby Jesus because that is the Gospel which the angels proclaimed.

Peace is what the angels proclaimed. Peace; it is definitely a feeling in your spirit but it is more. Peace is an objective reality. Unrest; has your spirit known unrest? Yeah, I know that feeling too. God takes the initiative. Peace is His gift. Peace has been located. Peace is located in the flesh of Christ. He is our peace. Christ crucified is perfect peace between God and man. Peace is a settled feeling, a deep and unassailable settled reality. That is the Christian message, the truth of Immanuel, God with us. Sin has no power over us. Unrest has its genesis in sin has been defeated. Death has no power over us. Christ died, once for all, but He is risen. In ancient iconography, artists depicted Jesus’ garden tomb as being atop Adam and Eve’s bones. Jesus’

resurrection shatters death and opens the kingdom of heaven. We are settled in heart and mind because of the very real events of Christ's life and His ministry among us. I realize that some of you have lost dear ones in the last year, perhaps very recently. The Lord knows your pain. He has resolved death and would comfort you with His love, His light, and His grace. His throne is also our altar. He gives you the cup of peace to drink, His blood shed for the forgiveness of sin. Drink deeply; drink happily; drink celebrating Christmas and heaven and hope and truth and love. God is with us. Tonight, we are shepherds.