

## THE GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

Hear again the Word of the Lord:

*Then the angel said to them, "No (longer) shall all of you continue to fear, for behold I gospelize to all of you Great Joy which will be for all the people; because has been born for all of you today, (the) Savior Who remains Christ (the) Lord, in (the) city of David!"<sup>1</sup>*

That message has been gospelized for over two thousand years. That is, the angel's proclamation has been "heralded as Good News," all around the world. As you heard this most holy night, that joy-filled announcement had its beginning in the fields outside of Bethlehem.

This congregation, and multitudes like her, reflected the magnificence and beauty of that first Good News declaration as we sang, once again, the greater Gloria. (During Advent, which ends this night, following an old and helpful tradition, we had been fasting from the opening glorias in the Lord's Services). Through us, through you tonight, the angelic message of Good News sounded forth from a Gloria Hymn. As you sang these words, did you reflect on the heavenly reality that your voices were joining the ancient hymn of God's angel armies?

*Angels we have heard on high, Sweetly singing over the plains, And the mountains in glad reply, Echoing their joyous strains, Gloria in excelsis Deo. Gloria in excelsis Deo.<sup>i</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2: 10-11

Those last phrases are in Latin. That means that we were again singing in tongues tonight. Scripture makes it clear that whenever foreign tongues are used in the Lord's Services – be they of men or angels – they should be translated for the benefit of the Church.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we should recall that, “Gloria in excelsis Deo,” means, “Glory to God in the highest.”

Ok, so what does it mean when we, when you, give glory to God in the highest? It simply means that we echo the Word of God back to Him even as we remember that we are joined, in God's Divine Services, with the heavenly hosts. God, you may recall, is the source of glory, that is that which is revealed in beautiful light.

This night, giving glory to God occurs as we sing and otherwise respond with God's Word to that which God is doing among us. The Advent time, the special season that is given to the Church, to you, to hear of Christ's comings in the flesh, draws to a close even now. Advent's days of lights that reflect Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love have led us to the point of hearing of the Father's Love in the angelic proclamation of the Good News of Great Joy!

To display that here, the purples and pinks of Advent are giving way to the golds and whites of Christmas. That color shift is done to lead us into twelve days of celebration of Christ's nativity. Tonight, the colors remind us that we are to proclaim the divine message that God, the eternal Son, He Who was once immaculately conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, was born. His birth was without sin, and happened

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<sup>2</sup> *I Corinthians* 14:27-28, cf. *I Corinthians* 13:1.

without disturbing His mother's virginity. All that was accomplished by the Divine will so that Jesus would become the Savior for all people.<sup>3</sup>

Even now, as clocks tick away the minutes, the annual season of expectation of Christ's coming gives way to the season that is given to celebrate Christ's birth. Many of us who are regular in receiving God's gifts on Sundays have already heard of Christ's coming through His triumphal entry into Jerusalem to die to take away the sins of all people. We have heard of the signs Christ's final coming, those which continue to be seen in the heavenly lights. Jesus' confession of His coming as the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, was revealed to the Baptizer and his disciples. A day ago, we heard of John's leaping in the womb, as he rejoiced at the coming of Jesus that was heralded by Mother Mary's greeting Elizabeth. God has used such Advent proclamations to prepare us, to ready you, to hear this night's Good News of great joy.

In time, that proclamation God began by physically acting in history and in geography. This we know, for St. Luke through his research meticulously recorded the events of Christ's coming in the flesh to be the Savior for all people.<sup>4</sup> The Evangelist would certainly have had access to St. Matthew's infancy narrative concerning Jesus. Dr. Luke likely interviewed Mary, the Mother of our Lord to determine and record the events surrounding Jesus' birth. It is possible that one or more of the shepherds who

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<sup>3</sup> c.f. *Matthew* 1:23; *Isaiah* 7:14.

<sup>4</sup> *Luke* 1:1ff.

witnessed that glorious light, song, and the newborn Christ Jesus had been available for Luke to interview.

It is most certain that all those testimonies agreed concerning the events of that most blessed night. There were enough eye-witnesses available to the Evangelist Luke to enable him to accurately record the events surrounding the birth of the Christ. That means their testimonies would have stood as true witness to the truth in any Israelite court of the day.<sup>5</sup>

Why is that important to us, to you, tonight?

We live in an age where a man can be convicted in the court of public opinion through simple, unsubstantiated, claims. It seems, regularly, that when those claims are researched, no evidence is produced. At times, witnesses cannot be found to offer testimonies that are in agreement with one another as to the alleged crimes of an accused.

You should remember that such “trial by court of public opinion” is nothing new. History, in time, reveals the continual repetition of such bad legal practice. Jesus Himself, more than three decades after His sinless birth, was convicted, and condemned to death by a court of public opinion.

Even so, after that sentence was carried out, Jesus was vindicated. His resurrection from the dead, witnessed to by hundreds over the course of forty days, serves as eternal proof. Yes, even this holy night stands as witness to the reason for the Nativity Season – the Christ was born to die that we, that you, might have the

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<sup>5</sup> c.f. *Deuteronomy* 17:6-7; 19:15; *Matthew* 18:16.

forgiveness of sins and blessed eternal life. Hear again how the Holy Spirit moved the Evangelist to begin to record his research of the Savior's birth announcement:

*And it became, in those days, (that a) decree went out from Caesar Augustus for all the inhabited world to continue to be registered.<sup>6</sup>*

Think of what that Gospel witness is providing. He is giving a general time, and a large place in which the events of the birth of Jesus took place. This helps the hearers of the testimony, beginning from the time Luke's Gospel began to circulate, to set in their minds that this birth was not simply a spiritual event, but also an historical one.

Think about how the narrative opens, who it names. From multiple sources we can learn that the Caesar mentioned was a man named Gaius Octavius. He was an adopted son of Julius Caesar. He then had become known as *Octavian*, and had received the title *Imperator Caesar Divi Filius*. He had consolidated his rule of the Roman Empire by the year we date 27 B.C.. At the beginning of that year, the Roman Senate gave him the honorary title, *Augustus*.

All that reveals that the Christ, the Commander of the Angel Armies, the King of kings, the Son of the Living God, was born no earlier in human history than 27 B.C.. Jesus' birth occurred during the reign of Octavian, the Roman Commander, Emperor, son of a god.

Yes, we are supposed to understand the name-play that is taking place! (This will become important to remember later, in Holy Week, as Jesus is brought to trial for

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 2:1.

insurrection, that is, for claiming to be King). Tonight, St. Luke's historical record continues, as it further narrows the historical dating for Jesus' birth:

*This registration happened (before the) governorship of Syria of Quirinius.<sup>7</sup>*

History records that governor Quirinius annexed Judea, the southern part of the land of Israel. St. Luke, in his second book, records that, as the annexation began, Quirinius ordered a census. That one occurred in the year we date A.D. 6.<sup>8</sup> External Roman records indicate that the Roman government took a census every 14 years. Simple subtraction would then place Jesus' birth around the year we date 8 B.C.

St. Matthew, in his parallel witness to the birth of Jesus, records that it occurred during the reign of Herod the Great. He died in 4 B.C..<sup>9</sup> That puts the following events in history, in Judah, with a date falling between 8 B.C. and 4 B.C.:

*Then all went to be registered, each into his own city.<sup>10</sup>  
Joseph went up also from Galilee, from (the) city of Nazareth into Judea  
into (a) city of David which is called Bethlehem,  
because he was from the house and clan of David,  
to be registered together with Mary,  
the one having been betrothed to him,  
who was pregnant.<sup>11</sup>*

That is a narrative that most, if not all, here have heard before. It precedes that which Linus in, *A Charley Brown Christmas*, has been telling all his viewers since

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 2:3. See: Just, Arthur A. 1996 *Luke 1:1-9:50*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 103ff.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 5:37.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 2:1.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 2:3

<sup>11</sup> Luke 2:4-5.

1965.<sup>12</sup> Ok, let's focus back on the true history we have been recounting. We will get to Linus' favorite text that defines "what Christmas is all about," in a minute!

Sometime between 8 and 4 B.C. Joseph followed the law of the Roman government. (He was going to pay his taxes, even though, as a Jew, he would have been appalled by the doings of the Roman government, and the horrors of the Roman governors and client kings. Keep that in mind this coming April). Joseph, in a registration, or census, traveled with his betrothed -- hear that to mean, "bridal contracted" wife -- who also would have to be recorded as a subject of Rome's governorship of Israel.

If they took the path of modern Israel's route 65, they would have traveled a bit over 157 kilometers, or 97 miles. Think of taking the back way from here down to the west side of Mesa, AZ. Joseph and Mary would have accomplished that journey very likely on foot (remember, they don't get the precious gifts from the Magi until they were living in a house. That visit could have occurred up to two years after Jesus' birth). That means that Jesus, and Mary, in the ninth month of her pregnancy, would have taken at least a thirty-three-hour hike. Those of us who have walked shopping malls with our laboring wives can attest to that which comes after such a long time of walking -- a baby!

For Mary, and her betrothed husband Joseph, the baby came at the right time, in the right place, to fulfill all the Old Testament prophecies about the birth of Messiah (the Anointed One of God)! He was born in the place, Bethlehem, that may be literally

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<sup>12</sup> Internet. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbjsOapLsYU>. Accessed 22 December 2018.

translated, “House of Bread.” It is in that “House of Bread,” that the new-born “Bread of Life,” reclined in a stall where animals were housed and fed.<sup>13</sup>

Yes, dear ones, that teaching reveals another word-play mystery for you. Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, Whose body once laid in a manger, now is laid upon paten, as the Word of God is spoken over simple bread. He who was born in the city where King David once tended the flocks, was birthed where lambs were raised for Temple sacrifice. That you, and all hearers of the historically witnessed facts of Jesus’ birth would understand, the God Who once chose a shepherd boy named David to be King of Israel, had come in time and place in order to be the King of kings. That means that this revelation, Linus’ text that declares “what Christmas is all about,” should be no mystery to you now:

*And shepherds were in the field by (Bethlehem), making the fields their courtyard, and continually guarding (in the) watch of the night over their flocks.<sup>14</sup>*

There they were, according to the testimony gathered by St. Luke, just doing that which they did day and night. The text informs us that they were living with the flocks. They did so that the unblemished lambs in particular would be kept safe for sacrifice in the Temple that Herod was rebuilding for the Jews.

We can but imagine the lowly shepherds – they were regarded as having one of the lowest vocations, or jobs, in that time period – what their reaction would be to that which follows. They weren’t even in the same mindset you may have tonight. That is,

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<sup>13</sup> Luke 2:7.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 2:8.

well, you are in the Church, so if the heavens opened and we could see the angel hosts that are actually here, well, we should not be surprised. Right?! Hear that which took place then visibly and audibly, that which is even now taking place here invisibly and inaudibly:

*Then (an) Angel of (the) Lord appeared suddenly to them, and (the) glory of the Lord (shone) round-about them, and they feared (a) great fear.<sup>15</sup>*

In this location, later, carefully step over, away from the lights, onto the basketball court. Look up to the heavens tonight. Envision them suddenly being filled with light, with fiery spirit-messengers. Imagine that the darkness would be shoved back, and the glory of the Lord, the divine Light, would be all about you.

You would be more than in awe, you would hold a holy fear. That is because, in his or her core, every human knows, on account of human imperfections, (our sins), that we cannot stand in the Presence of the Holy. You would need to hear that which the Angel declared to the shepherds long ago:

*“No (longer) shall all of you continue to fear, for behold I gospelize to all of you Great Joy which will be for all the people; because has been born for all of you today, (the) Savior Who remains Christ (the) Lord, in (the) city of David!”<sup>16</sup>*

Just so, tonight, human angels – messengers of the Divine Word – have called you into the Presence of God. We have invoked His Name upon us. We have prayed that His “True Light... would lead us into the joys of heaven.”<sup>17</sup> We have proclaimed that Divine Light in Old and New Testament readings.

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<sup>15</sup> Luke 2:9.

<sup>16</sup> Luke 2: 10-11

<sup>17</sup> Viet Dietrich collect for the Midnight Mass.

This we have done that you might rejoice in the Great Joy that is given and received in the Real Presence of Jesus the Christ. We have declared to you the testimony of the One Who was laid in a manger feed-trough. We reveal that He is the One Who even now comes to you in Word, and soon, from His Table. Out of all of that reality, spiritual and earthly, we have led you to sing with the angels:

*Glory to God in (the) highest;  
And upon the earth: peace in men of His good pleasure.<sup>18</sup>*

It has pleased God to give you His Son again tonight. Jesus Who was born on earth, and laid in a manger, comes to His people again, through His Word and His Sacraments. From that, we remember that we have the Good News of Great Joy. As we remain in its proclamation we understand that we are the people of His good pleasure.

**The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

Christmas Eve Midnight (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)

Psalm 96; Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

December 24-25, 2018

*Pastor Michael A. Morehouse*  
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**Soli Deo Gloria**

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<sup>i</sup> “*Angels We Have Heard on High*,” tr.. “The Crown of Jesus, Part 2,; London, *Lutheran Service Book*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (1862, alt.) 2006, 368.1.

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<sup>18</sup> *Luke* 2:14.