

BORN OUTSIDE THE INN - Luke 2: 1-14

**The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ (3:00), December 24, 2008
Calvary Lutheran Church, West Chester, PA + Pastor Roy Almquist**

We have come now to the most magical celebration of the year. No matter how much we have done to get ready .. no matter how many things did not get accomplished .. the moment is now. Christmas is here!

- Christmas is **a time when the spirit is lifted** by the wonder of common things: an evergreen tree, a poinsettia plant, a familiar carol, and a letter from an old friend.
- Christmas is **a time of illumination**, when candles burn, friendships are rekindled, and our better natures are refueled with hope and determination.
- Christmas is **a time to remember forgotten joys** .. the love of someone no longer with you, the wonder of children, running downstairs on Christmas morning, a reconnection with a dear friend who had been separated from you, the happy homecoming of church members we have not seen for awhile.

Christmas is the joyful announcement that God so loved the world that he bent down to touch our planet through the birth of a Child. A fanciful idea? Of course it is, but it has become the defining vision of countless believers for more than two thousand years. And to those who would call the story of Jesus' birth a naive and foolish myth, I would say:

- *Tell me the story that centers your life.*
- *Does it have power to inspire others?*
- *Is it timeless?*
- *Does it encourage generosity?*

The great English bard Robert Browning once asked in a poem:

What think ye of Christ, friend, when all's done and said?
Like you this Christianity or not?
It may be false .. but will you wish it true?
Has it your vote to be so if it can? [Robert Browning, **Bishop Blougram's Apology**]

Christmas asks us, *What think ye of this story Luke told .. do you like it? Do you wish it true?*

In reality, the story of Christmas begins with words from the Prophet Isaiah: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.* [Isaiah 9: 2]

At Christmas we celebrate the coming of this *long-expected light* to a stable in Bethlehem, an event proclaimed by angels and observed by shepherds. This announcement continues to invite and inspire people to the present time.

All saving ideas start small. The birth of Jesus was no different. Luke's narrative places this great event in the context of a census decreed by the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus, a coldhearted plan to increase taxes and conscript soldiers.

A simple carpenter like Joseph had no power to resist such a command and so he took his betrothed Mary to his ancestral home of Bethlehem, even though a four-day journey was ill advised for a woman expecting a child. But no one cares about the plight of the poor, a fact brought home when the young couple arrived in Bethlehem and could find no suitable place to stay.

So, just as God chose two ordinary outsiders, Mary and Joseph, as vehicles to bring glad tidings of great joy to all people, so God moved a particular innkeeper to provide the couple a place in his stable where they could be safe and secure. And in that humble barn, Jesus was born. *He who would be the Bread of Heaven was thus laid in the food box of cattle!*

I have always believed that the birth of Jesus in the stable, rather than the inn, was no mishap but a dramatic statement about how God works. If we have any sense that Divine providence orders things we must understand that our Savior's birth was not an accident but a clear proclamation. Luke wants us to know that God has a way of coming into history from the outside – *outside the established order, outside the social institutions, outside the comfort zone of mainstream people, outside the inn.*

We like to get all romantic about that *Little Town of Bethlehem*, but, in reality, this village was under military rule when Jesus was born, not unlike the present-day reality in the occupied West Bank of Palestine. I have visited the Holy Land twice in the last five years and I can assure you that if Mary and Joseph were traveling to Bethlehem today they would have to pass through numerous military checkpoints, including a steel gate that provides the only access through the 25-foot high security barrier that cuts off Bethlehem from the outside world. Today Jesus would be born not in a stable but on an endless line at an Israeli checkpoint!

Into such a dark and divided world, a world quite different from the one depicted in our Christmas cards and carols, Jesus Christ was born. But I am not sure we truly understand the impact of what we celebrate this night. The greatest reason why most of us have trouble comprehending the miracle of the Savior's birth is the simple fact that we are too rich, too preoccupied, too blinded by the bright lights around us.

Jesus came for people who dwelt in darkness, the hopeless, the oppressed, those without a place to rest their heads. That does not sound like most of us gathered here this afternoon.

It is easy to savor the joy of a baby born in humble circumstances. That is why the world loves Christmas. But the Church knows that ..

- **the baby grew up** and taught a disturbing ethic of unconditional love, challenging the status quo, and embracing those who lived at the margins of life,
- **the baby grew up** and threatens the authorities of all time with his notion of the Kingdom of God where all will be welcomed at the same banquet table and no one will have a higher status because of their wealth or place of birth,
- **the baby grew up** and proclaimed a Gospel of forgiveness, tolerance, and total opposition to killing .. a message that forever creates conflict with those who are convinced that the only path to peace is through military might.

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift was given. Sadly we often miss the meaning of Christmas because of the clutter we create with our celebrations of it. Our biggest mistake is that we assume Jesus was born in the inn with us, where the meals are served on linen tablecloths, the wine is vintage, and the piano player knows all our favorite songs. How we need to remember, as Matthew tells us, that Jesus was not found among the people in the inn, but rather, He was the one .. *who had no place to lay his head.* [Matthew 18: 20b]*

And (Mary) gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. [Luke 2: 7a]
That is where we find Jesus .. outside. His homelessness defines his life and ministry. His homelessness is also the greatest challenge to those of us who sincerely would like to follow Him.

So we come to the most magical celebration of the year .. the moment is now. Christmas is here!

May this joyous Good News, first announced to Shepherds and Wise Men, and then to the whole world, break through our coldness and fear that it may be born in us this day and always. *Joy to the world, the Lord is come; Let earth receive her King.*
AMEN.