

A Celebration of Christmas Eve
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
24 December 2022

Luke 2:1-20

Great events require great preparation. Think for example of a wedding and all the decisions that must be made around dates, invitations, reception halls, catering, music, etc. I remember an occasion that required preparations at a massive scale. I was in a Roman Catholic Seminary in 1986 and 1987 when the Archdiocese of Miami was preparing for the visit of Pope John Paul II to the United States. The Pope was doing a tour of nine cities that would start in Miami. A multi-agency task force was set-up the first week of September of 1986, an entire year before the actual visit to Miami, which was to take place from September 10th - September 11th, 1987.

As a part of the visit the Pope would be welcomed by 4,500 political and religious dignitaries led by President Ronald Reagan; he would have a parade down Biscayne Boulevard on the evening of September 10th; and finally he would have a mass on the morning of September 11th at Tamiami Park. Our seminary and a sister school also in Miami were assigned the task of setting up and clearing all the chairs at the park before and after the Eucharist. That simple task of setting and removing chairs required countless hours of training, background screening, and security clearance, not to mention the countless hours of actual work. Everywhere else in the city, entire city blocks were painted, hundreds of homeless people were removed from the streets and placed in shelters, Metro-Dade police conducted countless drills, and several structures were built. This two-day visit consumed the attention of hundreds of volunteers, and city/state/federal employees for almost an entire year.

The birth of God's Son was also expected and much anticipated by the Jewish people and their Scriptures. The Old Testament announced the arrival of one who will be the offspring of Eve and who will crush the head of the serpent, blamed for causing the great fall of humanity (Genesis 3:15). Moses himself announced to his people that God would raise a great prophet to lead them after he is gone. God says to Moses in Deuteronomy 18, "I will put my words in his mouth and he will tell them everything I command him." During the kingdom of David, the prophet Nathan is sent to David to announce to him God's covenantal promises. God tells David through Nathan, "I will raise one of your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body and I will establish his kingdom... forever... Your throne will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7.) Now, we know that none of the kings that followed David had a kingdom that lasted more than a few years. For this reason, the Jewish people began to see Messianic hope behind this promise to David. The Messiah, who would come one day to liberate the nation, would be David's Son and his kingdom would be eternal.

By the time of the last prophets, this Messianic hope was already fairly well known among the people. The prophets themselves advanced this Messianic Hope. Jeremiah announced the birth of “A new Righteous King in the line of David” and the reestablishment of the Jewish people back in their own land. (Jeremiah 23:5.) The “early Isaiah” also announced a Righteous King who would be born of a virgin and who would be called Emmanuel, “God with us is.” (Isaiah 9:1-7.) In Beautiful words he tells us, “Onto us a child is born, a Son is Given, the Government of all will be placed on his Shoulders.” This birth is so significant that all the weapons and garments covered with the blood of war and violence will be nothing but fuel for the fire. This child will be one day called “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Everlasting Father,” and “Prince of Peace.” He will reign in David’s throne forever with Justice and Righteousness.

The “Latter Isaiah” tells us how this Godly Messiah will accomplish his Mission: He will be God’s Servant, he will have God’s Spirit on him, he will bring justice to the nations in faithfulness, he will open the eyes of the blind, free captives from prison, and liberate those who sit in darkness. He will be a Suffering Servant, whose appearance will be disfigured beyond that of any man. He will be despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, considered by many to be smitten by him, and afflicted. Pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. His punishment will bring us peace because his wounds heal us. But this Suffering Servant will be vindicated by God and will be given a portion among the Great.

The Psalms announce the Messiah throughout. Just to give you a few examples, psalm 2:2, 18:50, 84:9, 132:10 and others speak of God’s Anointed, a reference to the Messiah to come. In the New Testament itself we see three apparitions of the Archangel Gabriel announcing the coming of the Messiah. He first appears to Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father when he was offering incense at the temple. The angel also appeared to the Virgin Mary when he told her she was to be the mother of the Messiah. The angel appeared one last time to Joseph in a dream and revealed to him the true nature of Mary’s son. He was to be the Messiah long promised to Israel. Jesus was the one who was to save the world at the appointed time; the Son of God.

So, after nearly a thousand years of announcements, the Son of God is finally here. With all of this preparation and prophetic expectation you would think that the Savior of Humanity would be born in a royal palace, greeted by more than 4,500 dignitaries, adored and worshipped by millions. You would expect that if tickets were sold for this event, they would have sold out in a few seconds. This event would be bigger than Taylor Swift’s upcoming concert, an event that crashed Ticketmaster’s homepage because of the millions of requests for tickets. This event should have been bigger than that! People of all nations should have been gathered in Bethlehem waiting for just a glance at this most amazing boy. Yet, that is not what happened.

In the stillness of the night on a quiet, humble stable, the Son of God was born to us. There were no crowds of adoring fans, just a few lowly animals. There were no great

reception banquets from those among whom he came, but rather some interesting gifts from foreigners considered to be pagans. There was no great sold-out spectacle but rather some humble shepherds who came to pay their respects. In a most ironic twist, the Savior of the world was born in great quietness and solitude. John 1:11 tells us, “He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.”

“We sometimes yearn for great and startling evidence of God’s presence. We say, “Oh, if only I could see miracles now, as in Bible days. If only something great would happen to me!” (Teachers Commentary, 645). We all want what is sensational. Yet, we must learn a great lesson from God. His greatest miracle happened in quietness, in the simplicity of common life. We must look at the manger and realize that God’s work often takes place within our common lives. The greatest miracle God gives us is that it doesn’t take a miracle to see his acts of amazing love in our lives. Every day we wake up and get to see another day is a blessing from the Lord. Every smile we get from our children and loved ones is a miracle and a gift from the Lord. We see God’s great miracles every time a broken relationship is mended, a lonely heart is warmed by the companionship it seeks, a hardened soul breaks down and asks for forgiveness, and a believer whose faith has become cold and institutionalized experiences God’s love in a new and powerful way. All of these are amazing miracles of the Lord that are best seen and appreciated in the simplicity and quietness of everyday life.

My friends, the Good News this day is that onto us a child has been born and a Son given. And he chose to reveal himself to humble shepherds and to foreigners in the stillness of a simple manger. The great news is that God has chosen to lift up the humble and to make them witnesses to the greatest miracle in the history of humanity. We too are invited today to be the first witnesses of this birth. We too are called to come to the manger. We need this baby and the salvation this baby has to offer us. I invite you all today to open your hearts to this baby, to open your eyes to God’s amazing works in your life. God speaks to you in the everyday of your life. Not in majestic and spectacular signs but in the gentle stillness of your life. Be attentive for he is speaking to you today in the person of his Son. Listen to him because only in him can you and I find all the answers to life’s questions and the meaning of our lives.

Let Us Pray:

Dear Lord, thank you for the amazing Christmas Gift of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Thank you for choosing to reveal yourself to humble, simple mortals. Open our hearts and minds to accept your Son in our lives daily and give us the courage to boldly proclaim his name to the ends of the earth. In Jesus’ name we pray. AMEN!