

A Celebration of Christmas
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
24 December 2020

Luke 2:1-20

We are here today to celebrate perhaps the most famous birthday in history. Jesus of Nazareth is born in the city of Bethlehem, in the province of Palestine. He is born in a stable, surrounded by animals on a clear and starry night. With just his mother and father for company, the boy is born into a world filled with darkness and despair. A world groaning under the weight of injustice, violence, and sin. In the middle of the night, while the world turns as it always did, while humanity engages in life in the same way they always did, while nature continues its cycles of life and death in the way it has done from the very beginning... a small cry softly interrupts the status quo. A small cry in the night proclaims that nothing will be the same. A small cry announces the year of the Lord's favor. God is among us. Emmanuel has arrived. A light has finally appeared for those who for so long walked in darkness.

This baby is the offspring of Eve who will crush the head of the serpent blamed for causing the Great Fall (Genesis 3:15.) He is the great prophet promised to Moses in Deuteronomy 18, when God says, "I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him." He is the king promised to David by God 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..." (2 Samuel 7.) He is the "Righteous King" in the line of David announced by Jeremiah (23:1-8 and 33:14-16.) He is the one Isaiah says will be born of a virgin and will be called Emmanuel, "God with us." He is the one who one day will be called, "Wonderful Counselor", "Mighty God", "Everlasting Father", and "Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:1-7.) He is the "Suffering Servant" who one day will die for us and will be vindicated by God in his resurrection (Isaiah 53.) He is the one foretold by the Psalms (2:2, 18:50, 84:9, 132:10.) The one promised by the Archangel Gabriel and announced by John the Baptist. He is none other than God made flesh. A "one of us" God.

And yet, the world does not even take notice of this birth. There is no fancy birthing room, no medical team, and no nurses or caregivers other than Joseph. In fact, the Savior of the world is born in absolute poverty. Even though the birth of the Messiah had been waited for centuries, there is no great entourage, no representation from the Temple authority or High Priests, no important guests. The baby is born in the stillness of the night, in great quietness, and in great humility. In fact, no one even notices his birth. Life goes on all around this rather humble scene at the stable, and no one seems aware of the great miracle taking place. Life goes on, and no one notices that the battle lines have been drawn; the one to conquer the night has been born; the only one who can defeat the

powers of evil rests peacefully among the animals; the one who is the only hope for humanity lies in his mother's arms under the stars.

Now, to be fair, there are some who notice the birth of the Messiah. Luke tells us that there were shepherds taking care of the sheep in the fields. They come to worship Jesus, after angels appear to them in the fields. I find it very interesting that these shepherds are called by God to witness the birth of his son. Interesting because shepherds were not allowed to be witnesses in a court of law in first century Palestine. According to commentators, "TalBab Sanhedrin 25b" (Jewish Documents) mention that herdsmen were added by the early rabbis to the list of those ineligible to be judges of witnesses since frequently they grazed their flocks on other people's lands. Thus, they were among the type of dishonest people who were excluded from court." (Brown, The Birth of the Messiah. Footnote at the bottom of page 420.) "They are people whom we wouldn't expect to be worshipping Jesus. Because of their jobs, shepherds normally didn't make it to the Temple worship services. They didn't practice Sabbath day observances. They were seen as ignorant, irreligious, immoral, crude and vulgar Jews – and they smelled bad, too." (Stoffregen, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke02x1.htm>.) They sleep in the fields, in many cases they don't have access to clean clothes for weeks at a time, and they spend most of their time with smelly sheep. And yet, these are the people chosen by God to be the witnesses of the birth of his son.

My friends, there is great anxiety around the globe about Christianity. Many believe that Christianity will soon disappear as secularism continues to advance. Many see proof that Christianity has run its course in the empty cathedrals of Europe. Ancient churches turned into pubs and restaurants, monasteries turned into museums, and large cathedrals with average Sunday attendance below 50 parishioners every week. But I look at this manger tonight and I see those shepherds, and I realize that God has an uncanny ability to break into our lives; to surprise us with his abundant love; and to rescue us, even when we don't think we need saving. None of those shepherds in the field that night ever expected to be addressed by God. They did not expect to become the first witnesses to the greatest miracle in human history. They had no idea that they would be chosen to fulfill God's will. God has an incredible ability to exceed our expectations. He still speaks powerfully into the lives of shepherds all around the world.

Yes, we live in a world where secularism advances rapidly. Just this month all of us who watch television or streaming sites have been treated to what Christmas movie after Christmas movie. We have watched classics like "Santa Paws," "Desperately Seeking Santa," and "The Santa Clause." Not to mention a large assortment of movies with princes and princesses of made-up countries like Makoto, Malkiva, and Stratonica. You know these movies; they all have a beautiful royal from these countries who happens to be in America on State business and whose car breaks down in a busy highway in Los

Angeles. They are invariably rescued by an American cook, waitress, or auto mechanic with whom they fall in love. After some drama, said cook or waitress leaves everything behind and becomes the new Queen or King of said country. I swear, we have hundreds of Americans in charge of made-up countries around the world.

All humor aside, not once have we seen a reference to Christ, a movie about Jesus's birth, or have we heard any mention about the real reason for the season. I understand the absence of Christian themes. Hollywood is so busy with all those royal weddings and coronation banquets. I mean, the poor people of Stratonia need some good news this year. Who has any time for this Jewish baby we celebrate today? And yet, this baby will not go away quietly. This baby has come to upset the status quo. This baby will continue to break into people's lives and will continue to change many of us from the inside out, whether Hollywood notices him or not!

This baby is here to stay, to challenge our complacency, to warn us about our excesses, and to caution us about our indifference. This baby will continue to be born because we still need the hope that only he can bring us. We need the forgiveness which only he makes possible. We need the "God with us and for us" because we live in a world that is against us. We need his humanity because we live in an inhuman world. And we need his compassion because we live in a world where compassion is in short supply. We need his divinity because we live in a world that no longer has any use for mystery, for transcendence, and for eternity. We need this baby in our lives, and we need the Suffering Servant he will become. Only Christ can be the answer to what afflicts the human heart. Secularism and materialism can fill our houses with brand new toys, but they can never give us a sense of fulfillment, a purpose for our lives, the meaning we crave and want. We need this baby because we need God in our lives.

In many ways we are as unlikely as those shepherds to be called by God to be his witnesses. And yet, God calls us today to gaze upon this crib and to witness the birth of his Son. Today, God gives each of us a task of great importance. We are to live as witnesses to the light. We are to go into the world as witnesses of the Christ. We are to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We have come here today to celebrate God's outrageous love for us, a love announced since long ago, a love made real through the birth of Jesus, the Christ. We have come to be witnesses to the greatest love story ever to take place.

I pray today that you will welcome this baby into your hearts, into your lives, and into your homes. This baby is God's gift of love to you and to me. May we let him transform our lives. May we let him fill our lives with joy, peace, and love. Amen!