

Luke 2:16-18
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2023

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, “And [the shepherds] went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

All Advent season long, we’ve followed the Scriptural record and heard from Isaiah, Malachi, John the Baptist as they all speak of the Glory of God and forewarn of the *second* coming of the One who will come with vengeance and lay the axe to the root of the tree and cut down the nations and, with his winnowing fork, gather the wheat of His Church, but throw the impenitent chaff into the fire. Even the angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary includes the image that “he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

What a glorious, but (to the sinner) perhaps an ominous image. What a wondrous, but perhaps ominous notion – to be a sinner standing before the Most High King of all glory!

And so, in anticipation of that second coming and that Last Day of the coming judgment – which cannot be met by the sinner’s own righteousness, but can only theoretically be met in

the Lord's Christ, covered by His righteousness – the sinner must wonder, "How approachable could this Christ of the God of all glory be? Sure, He promises to first come in a day of salvation, a day of grace and favor, but how unbearable might it be to even approach Him and ask for safehaven!" It's like the child of countless stories, books, and movies – who is to receive help from the mysterious or domineering character who towers over him or penetrates and pierces the child's soul with a watchful stare. It's like the children of Narnia being told the untame lion named Aslan is their comfort. Really? How approachable can a roaring lion (the untame God) possibly be? Are we sinners not tempted to sympathize with the servant of that parable, the servant who gave his talent back and said, "I knew you to be a hard man"? How approachable can this One be?... this God of all glory who will come to judge the living and the dead, whose glory shines around the angelic host and terrifies shepherds far braver than any of us to face wolves and predators of night with nothing but a staff. Yes, if *they* are terrified by the glory of God, how much comfort or hope can we have in approaching Him to hide in Him at His glorious appearing on the final day?

Do you think God overlooked this fear of ours? Do you think He is insensitive to your concern that the God of all glory would be unapproachable even to seek help from, let alone to be

comforted by? And so, how divinely calming, yet how humanly-breathtaking that you, with the shepherds, are given to run to a stable and peer over a manger's edge and see a Child. There is your God of all glory. There is the Mighty One who will come again to judge the living and the dead. There he is meek – not to look conquerable, but to silently calls to you to come unto Him, for He is approachable. There, he is safe for you to draw near unto and hope in.

How much God loves you and is considerate of your need, that His Messiah would be so approachable. His mere appearance does not terrify, but beckons... beckons you to see the Most High God's gentleness and patience, that He knows you and your sin and your conscience's recognition of your deserved condemnation... He knows that you can handle nothing more than being brought near a child. Because of the guilt of your sin, the knowledge of your deserved condemnation, you would not trust being called near to a mighty warrior, a domineering king, a towering leader, even a robed pastor. And so, God came as a Child, that you might be certain that He is gracious, gentle, and – in this day of salvation – He is not dangerous.

Yes, for us to be saved, the Lord had to consider two 'dangers' – the first, of course, being our sin. That is the *real* danger, the real danger that required Him to sacrifice Himself, for

the danger was so great that only He could overcome it. But the *second* danger – though only *perceived* – was equally true. The second danger was that we would perceive his holiness to be more dangerous than our sin and, thus, not flee to Him. And so, to answer both dangers, he takes on human flesh, and comes as a humble child.

Consider how our opening hymn illustrated it:

Softly from His lowly manger, Jesus calls one and all:

“You are safe from danger!

Children, from the sins that grieve you, you are freed;

All you need, I will surely give you.”

Not only do we rejoice at these words, “How salvific!”, but we also put down our defenses at these words, “How comforting!” Indeed, how much comfort to know that the salvation which is promised us sinners – the deliverance from condemnation by the glorious God on account of our sin – is not reserved only for those who are courageous enough to approach the great and powerful, but the salvation is for all who will recognize the sympathetic compassion of God in swaddling His promises in a little Child: “Yes,” He whispers in His prophetic Word, “you may trust that this little child will not harm or deceive you... you may trust that He will march to the cross and contend with death *for* you. In all his gentle and tender mercy and

compassion toward you, he will nonetheless bare His mighty arm and set His face and grit His teeth and will destroy all that seeks to destroy *you*.” Or, how does the hymn say it?:

Hear! The Conqueror has spoken!:

“Now the foe, Sin, and woe, death and hell are broken!”

And all that divine warfare is swaddled in this little child, lowly in the manger. What divine wisdom! What a glorious, yet equally gracious plan of the sinner’s deliverance! “A little child shall lead them!” the prophet declared. “Unto us a *child* is born!” the prophet trumpeted. And, in the humble sight around which shepherds find it safe to gather, the mighty God roars. Yes, for you, sinner – safe to gather around this Child; yet, on your behalf, this holy God enfleshed silently bares His glorious might.

That brings us again to the text, “And when they saw it (when the shepherds saw the sight of the babe lying in the manger), they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.”

Meditate on that verse rightly. And, let me help you by warning you of how it has been meditated upon so wrongly:

Some of us are currently reading a book by a Lutheran theologian named Herman Sasse... the last recognized confessional Lutheran theologian of Germany’s history. In the

1920s (already 100 years ago), Sasse had opportunity to visit America and survey American Christianity in all its heterodox error (error not because it wasn't German, but because it wasn't Sacramental and took no comfort in the "for you" of the gospel!). Sasse wisely pointed out the difference between the preaching Americans were subject to and the preaching of the Lutheran confession and dependence upon Christ crucified.

To paraphrase, Sasse said that America's gospel is one of the Church's action, of doing. Everything is preached and taught with a question of what the church is doing with its faith, so that action and a constant quest for society's improvement becomes its goal. And from that comes the *social* gospel. (Sound familiar? Look at so much of American Christianity around you!) But, the true gospel is one of the Church's being, of the Church's receiving, being blessed, saved, regarded and defended by her Lord... simply living in that good news and eagerly awaiting the day of final deliverance.

Now, I tell you that because it helps you understand whether you have long heard rightly or wrongly this verse of the shepherds running to tell the good news. Do you hear it as a call to action, or as a report of the good news of great joy which shall be for all people: "And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child." How often

have you heard this as a call to action?! (And, certainly, that *can* be an application: Truly, “Go out, Christian! Go from this Christmas manger and tell the good news! The world needs you to confess it because it (the world) has long forgotten it!”)

But, does the Holy Spirit record this and draw you unto the manger to call you to action, or does He not also include the next line: “And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.” How come we never hear that verse? How come we always only hear, “Go tell it on the mountain,” rather than getting to dwell on and marvel at this good news hidden within the identity of this child, this good news brought to us by the shepherds (who, of course, share the title of that Latin word *pastor*).

The holy God sends his pastors, his shepherds, running to bring to you the good news regarding this infant Child. Hear the good news for what it is: You are not called to action by a Mighty God who needs you to ‘get the lead out’ and spread His glory. You are safe to wonder at the word, marvel at that which the shepherds saw with their own eyes and reported for the benefit of every generation. They went from the terrors of standing ‘sore afraid’ before the glory of God to huddling around a Child safe to approach.

You see, the verse is not a call to action; its focus is the truth concerning this child, that you may wonder and marvel at

what the shepherds reported and St Luke recorded. To be sure, that marvelous meditation will bear fruit of the lips confessing the Christ child before men... but such fruit of the Gospel is not the Gospel.

Thus, dwell on the gospel report of the shepherds regarding this infant. Once in history, in the child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in the manger, there was the Most High God, the King of Glory who will on the final day of history come to judge the living and the dead... but, today – in this age/era of the Church that is the ‘day of salvation’ – today, the Christ is still as gentle as when He was the child in the manger... He’s still safe to draw near unto and approach and congregate around on bended knee, to whisper the beggings of your pleading, “Lord, have mercy upon us” and know with certainty He will treat you with all the gentleness of the little child of Christmas night.

Now you may rejoice anew in your baptism, for in it you have been adopted and swaddled and laid down next to your divine brother in the stable and household of God. *Now* you may come openly in repentance to confess your sins, for your confession is heard by the One who is compassionate and knows how tender and gentle you need His absolution and forgiveness to be. *Now*, you may come boldly to and humbly congregate on bended knee around the manger trough of His Table, for His holy

glory is veiled and His flesh-and-blood presence in the Sacrament is full of compassion and longsuffering and grace, for He knows you need to be fed with all the tenderness of a mother nursing her child or a mother hen safeguarding her chicks under her wings.

Therefore, a blessed Christmas to you – and hear that not as a well-wishing or a sincere hope, but as a certain proclamation that the holy God is still compassionate toward you. He may no longer be the infant Child, but He is still one in flesh and blood with you. He may no longer be swaddled in cloths for you, but He is still swaddled and approachable in Word and Sacrament for you. He may no longer be laid in a manger for you, or even laid upon the cross for you... but, He forever bears the marks that testify He is still and forever *for you*... that you may now and forever hide in him and be found with Him when He comes again in His glory.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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