

Christmas Eve
Thursday, December 24, 2009
7.00 pm, Mass of the Angels

(Complete with the Preacher's Notes.)

GOSPEL: Luke 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

2 Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐξῆλθεν δόγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος Ἀυγούστου ἀπογράφεσθαι πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην. 2 αὕτη ἀπογραφή πρώτη ἐγένετο ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου. 3 καὶ ἐπορεύοντο πάντες ἀπογράφεσθαι, ἕκαστος εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πόλιν. 4 Ἀνέβη δὲ καὶ Ἰωσήφ ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἐκ πόλεως Ναζαρεθ εἰς τὴν Ἰουδαίαν εἰς πόλιν Δαυὶδ ἣτις καλεῖται Βηθλέεμ, διὰ τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν ἐξ οἴκου καὶ πατριᾶς Δαυὶδ, 5 ἀπογράψασθαι σὺν Μαριὰμ τῇ ἐμνηστευμένῃ αὐτῷ, οὓση ἐγκύω. 6 Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ ἐπλήσθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ τεκεῖν αὐτήν, 7 καὶ ἔτεκεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς τὸν πρωτότοκον καὶ ἐσπαργάνωσεν αὐτὸν καὶ ἀνέκλινεν αὐτὸν ἐν φάτνῃ, διότι οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ καταλύματι.

8 Καὶ ποιμένες ἦσαν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῇ αὐτῇ ἀγραυλοῦντες καὶ φυλάσσοντες φυλακὰς τῆς νυκτὸς ἐπὶ τὴν ποιμνὴν αὐτῶν. 9 καὶ ἄγγελος κυρίου ἐπέστη αὐτοῖς καὶ δόξα κυρίου περιέλαμψεν αὐτοὺς καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον μέγαν. 10 καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ ἄγγελος· μὴ φοβεῖσθε, ἰδοὺ γὰρ εὐαγγελίζομαι ὑμῖν χαρὰν μεγάλην ἣτις ἔσται παντὶ τῷ λαῷ, 11 ὅτι ἐτέχθη ὑμῖν σήμερον σωτὴρ ὃς ἐστὶν χριστὸς κύριος ἐν πόλει Δαυὶδ. 12 καὶ τοῦτο ὑμῖν σημεῖον, εὐρήσετε βρέφος ἐσπαργανωμένον καὶ κείμενον ἐν φάτνῃ. 13 καὶ ἐξαίφνης ἐγένετο σὺν τῷ ἀγγέλῳ πλῆθος στρατιᾶς οὐρανοῦ αἰνούντων τὸν θεὸν καὶ λεγόντων· 14 δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας.

In Those Days

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

The settling-in period whereby those who have come to worship tonight are here for many reasons, for many memories, for many hopes and dreams. The beginning of a Sermon on Christmas Eve should allow for a time of resting and then listening.

I.

In those days ... begins the Christmas Story as told by the wonderful Gospel-Story-Teller Luke.

We do not know precisely who he was, this master Story Teller ... yes, there are legends and traditions aplenty: Luke the Physician, Luke the Companion of Saint Paul, Luke the First Iconographer (who painted the first Icon of the Virgin Mary), Luke the Greek born in the City of Antioch, Luke the resident of Troas (where the ancient city of Troy stood) ... but these are in the end, legends and traditions, and who he was exactly we do not know.

Now, we are ready to listen, and so the Proclaimer (another term for "preacher") should get to it with haste

II.

What we do know, however, is the story he told, his *gospel*, his account of the Good News about Jesus. We have been reading this story and telling this story for nearly 21 Centuries, we hear it every Eve of Christmas ... and those of us who have been around for several years have it nearly memorized, we would not need the page in front of our eyes to repeat the story that is told in the Gospel of Luke, the Second Chapter.

In those days ... the words grab us from the beginning, they take hold of our imagination, they bring the story – the ancient story – and our story – our present-day story ... together ... attached (as it were) in such a way that we find ourselves entering into the story itself tonight.

We hope that *in those days* will also have something to say to us *in these days*. Luke was writing in the reality of his time with all the uncertainties and issues and problems and concerns before his eyes. And, we come here tonight in the midst of our time with all the uncertainties and issues and problems and concerns before our eyes ... and we come to listen to a word (no, more than a word ... to a *drama*) where in we are included not in the audience but in the play itself. For this Christmas Story is to be *our* Christmas Story as well, now, here, in these days, in this time, in this place.

OK, so if the Story Then has anything to do with the Story No, we have to define what it is, call it into being.

III.

Perhaps we find ourselves among the angels and the shepherds, out in the darkness of the night illuminated with a light that cannot be described, and echoing with a sound beyond anything we

have ever heard. Maybe in the darkness of our life, in its fear and dread, in the apprehension and trepidation that controls our days ... we can see that illumination, and hear that reverberation with the bold pronouncement *Do not be afraid* ... and that will stir us again to hope and live with the joy and cheerfulness of life that we want and need now and not in some tale from the past.

Perhaps we find ourselves standing next to Joseph, maybe placing a hand on Mary's shoulder as we admire the baby in her arms, nursing at her breast, wrapped in swaddling cloths ... the cloths that went around a newborn infant, a warm blanket tied together with strips of cloth to keep him warm. Maybe in the chill of our lives we yearn to feel again that swaddled warmth of our mother and her love and gentle kindness, to be held, to be understood, to be listened to, to be accepted, to have a place, a secure dwelling, a home.

Perhaps we find ourselves among the onlookers, those who are curious about what is this fuss that is being made by field hands who ran from the hillsides to the city, to the birthplace with a story of angels' voices in their tale of good news. Maybe it is our curiosity that comes along with us and sits beside us tonight and in this story is set afire tonight as once it was when we with all our curiosity began to learn and discover the wonder of creation.

Or maybe we find ourselves just sitting outside the door, listening, watching, waiting, perhaps resting ... just resting from weariness on this silent night, holy night as we pray for our world, our homes, our lives, to have the peace which permeates through this Christmas Gospel, which bubbles up like the bubbles in those old Christmas Tree Lights on Trees of Christmases Past, a Gospel bubbling up to bring to our weariness the tranquility we need and want and pray for every day.

In those days ... Luke begins, this wonderful and quite poetic way of telling the story that is not just for a people in a far away place and a far away time, but in our time. It is at the beginning, throughout, and into the future a living story about a Caring and Compassionate God.

In the baby, "...we celebrate God's reaching out to all humankind, none written off, none despised, none too strange, too bad, too inhuman."¹

It is where heaven and earth meet and we are in the middle of it all where it is possible as it was *in those days* now *in these days* ... possible to participate in the life of God and the peace of God which does indeed "pass all understanding" but does indeed enclose us in its grasp.

In the baby, in Jesus, we identify the God who comes near to us, seeks us out from the infant cry in the manger, and wants nothing more than for us to be near to what is Holy (God) and also near to what is human (each other).

(That's enough, it's Christmas Eve and time to bring the words proclaimed to a conclusion of hope and promise.)

IV.

When that happens ... when all that is yearning in us is touched by all that is holy and tonight loving with an infant kindness and generosity and compassion ... and when that is given as a gift, when that holy touching is shared with those we love and even with those unknown to us ... when that happens, we have experienced for ourselves the Christmas Gospel, and can indeed with the

¹ William Loader, website quotation: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkChristmas.htm>

angelic chorus proclaim in song and word and gesture *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace ...*

And now, the Prayer.

IV.

Let us pray.

O God who delights in the presence of all of your children,
grant us grace so that we can accept this great gift
you have bestowed upon us,
the gift of Jesus Christ.

Let us embrace Jesus.

Dispel the world's burden,
remove oppression,
bring good news of your peace to all.

Amen.

+Deo Gratia
The Rev. Benjamin Larzelere III
Pastor

Christmas Eve
Thursday, December 24, 2009
11.00 pm, Mass of the Shepherds
(The Midnight Mass)

(Complete with the Preacher's Notes.)

GOSPEL: Luke 2.8-20

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.
9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This was be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

8 Καὶ ποιμένες ἦσαν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῇ αὐτῇ ἀγραυλοῦντες καὶ φυλάσσοντες φυλακὰς τῆς νυκτὸς ἐπὶ τὴν ποιμνὴν αὐτῶν. 9 καὶ ἄγγελος κυρίου ἐπέστη αὐτοῖς καὶ δόξα κυρίου

περιέλαμψεν αὐτούς καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον μέγαν. 10 καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ ἄγγελος· μὴ φοβεῖσθε, ἰδοὺ γὰρ εὐαγγελίζομαι ὑμῖν χαρὰν μεγάλην ἣτις ἔσται παντὶ τῷ λαῷ, 11 ὅτι ἐτέχθη ὑμῖν σήμερον σωτὴρ ὅς ἐστιν χριστὸς κύριος ἐν πόλει Δαυίδ. 12 καὶ τοῦτο ὑμῖν σημεῖον, εὐρήσετε βρέφος ἐσπαργανωμένον καὶ κείμενον ἐν φάτνῃ. 13 καὶ ἐξαίφνης ἐγένετο σὺν τῷ ἀγγέλῳ πλῆθος στρατιᾶς οὐρανοῦ αἰνούντων τὸν θεὸν καὶ λεγόντων· 14 δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας.

15 Καὶ ἐγένετο ὡς ἀπῆλθον ἀπ' αὐτῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν οἱ ἄγγελοι, οἱ ποιμένες ἐλάλουν πρὸς ἀλλήλους· διέλθωμεν δὴ ἕως Βηθλέεμ καὶ ἴδωμεν τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦτο τὸ γεγονός ὃ ὁ κύριος ἐγνώρισεν ἡμῖν. 16 καὶ ἦλθαν σπεύσαντες καὶ ἀνεῦραν τὴν τε Μαριάμ καὶ τὸν Ἰωσήφ καὶ τὸ βρέφος κείμενον ἐν τῇ φάτνῃ· 17 ἰδόντες δὲ ἐγνώρισαν περὶ τοῦ ῥήματος τοῦ λαληθέντος αὐτοῖς περὶ τοῦ παιδίου τούτου. 18 καὶ πάντες οἱ ἀκούσαντες ἐθαύμασαν περὶ τῶν λαληθέντων ὑπὸ τῶν ποιμένων πρὸς αὐτούς· 19 ἡ δὲ Μαρία πάντα συνετήρει τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα συμβάλλουσα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς. 20 καὶ ὑπέστρεψαν οἱ ποιμένες δοξάζοντες καὶ αἰνούντες τὸν θεὸν ἐπὶ πᾶσιν οἷς ἤκουσαν καὶ εἶδον καθὼς ἐλαλήθη πρὸς αὐτούς.

In That Region

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

This is the Midnight Mass, which begins in our Parish at 11 pm and ends at Midnight. It is the time when all the preparations for Christmas have been done, or do not matter any more. There is nothing to do but to tell the story, and listen to it ... even while being the Proclaimer

I.

There is something profound about the Midnight Mass. What is profound about it is its simplicity and clarity.

When we come to this Service in our Christmas Eve celebrations, nearly everything we could possibly do to prepare for the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, the celebration of the Birth of Jesus ... just about everything we could do to get ready has been done, or left undone. We have walked Canyon Road again this year, or did not get to do it. We have had our Christmas Eve supper, or not having enough time, let it go. We have all the presents and gifts nicely wrapped and in order ... or we are wondering just how we are going to show our affection in a delayed manner tomorrow to those we love.

In this time of prayer and worship, in this time of telling again and hearing again the Christmas Gospel ... there is a beautiful gift each of us has been given, and that is the gift of simply letting the story be told, and letting ourselves hear it, take it in, and with Mary herself *treasure all these words and ponder them in our hearts.*

(Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity.)

II.

In that region ... says the Gospel-Story-Teller Luke as he writes ... *In that region there were shepherds* ...

In this region proclaims the Midnight Mass, the liturgy called *The Shepherd's Mass*, in this region ... in this place, in this time and moment and lateness ... the story asks that we again enter into it, and find our seats on the hillsides outside Bethlehem where branches have been placed in a circle of sorts to corral the sheep into safety under the watchful eyes of the shepherds. We are to sit with them and listen to the sounds of the night, the sounds of potential danger and harm ... we are to sit quietly and then with them hear the surprising rush of the wings of an angel who comes in the midst of the darkness and illuminates it with brightness and loudness scattering the sheep and causing the shepherds to fall down to the ground in fear and trembling.

Isn't Luke a wonderful storyteller of the Gospel of Good News that is about Jesus? No insignificant thing, Luke is saying, no insignificant thing, this birth, this baby, this moment.

It is enough news to be announced by an angel and not just one angel but a million of them spanning the sky like the Northern Lights themselves, so important is this message that it comes even to sleepy field-hands on a Judean hillside. That is what Luke means by writing *In that region*. He places the story into humanity, into the earth and with the placement, announces the Messenger of Heaven comes not Fear but *Good news of great joy for ... all people* ... everyone.

Did you hear that? *Everyone*. The Messenger speaks to the shepherds ages ago and keeps speaking to us ages later, this news is for ... everyone.

Luke writes in the time of oppression, we cannot ever forget that. It all has to do with Caesar, a foreign Emperor, certainly in the eyes of the people a really *non-Jew* whose compassion for his distant subjects was left to some puppet rulers and an army.

Caesar, Luke is saying, is the Imposter here. I quote The Rev. William Loader here (professor at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia) who notes that "Caesar Augustus was hailed as son of God, as bringer of peace, as saviour, as a good news person. Rome made much of these claims to legitimate its regime of suppression and exploitation, law and order, through the empire. So the Christmas story is a cheeky response. It parodies these claims: the Son of God is a baby whose family can't find accommodation; the good news of peace comes to ordinary shepherd folks of the hills; the peace is about real peace, real inclusiveness. It is people's peace, people's power, people's salvation and liberation."²

It is that peace which is the good news of the Gospel that Luke was writing in his time, it is that peace which comes lying in a manger, nursed by his mother, adored by his father, and grows up to be the Teacher who will proclaim himself the Kingdom of God.

That Kingdom is born tonight, the Midnight Mass tells us. That Kingdom of love and mercy and peace and justice and wellbeing and indeed "good news of great joy for all people" is at the very centre of this worship, and the story we are telling once again.

And as quiet as we have become in this nearly Midnight Hour, the message is not one of inactive passivity ... not at all, it is a Midnight Message that brings with it hope and the possibility of the healing of wounded souls, broken hearts, lonely lives, inadequate and unfulfilled dreams, and thereby what we call the healing of creation.

² William Loader, website quotation: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkChristmas.htm>

It comes to us, watching and waiting as we have for it to appear. The baby in his mother's arms calls to us to live in the very presence of the Holy One (God) and so love in the very presence of humanity (each other).

The shepherds left the baby and his parents, Luke insists, and went back to work, back to being shepherds, but now shepherds with a message of hope (Luke says, *glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen*) ... shepherds whose lives were changed in such a way that they were no longer observers of creation and humanity, but lovers of creation and every creature.

If we find that here at the Altar tonight, if we find that in this Christmas Gospel, if we find that in this story and in these prayers, and in these carols and songs ... then we, with the shepherds, have found the love that brings us closer to God and to each other ... and that, my brothers and my sisters, is the Christmas Gospel.

And now, the Prayer.

IV.

Let us pray.

O God who delights in the presence of all of your children,
grant us grace so that we can accept this great gift
you have bestowed upon us,
the gift of Jesus Christ.

Let us embrace Jesus.

Dispel the world's burden,
remove oppression,
bring good news of your peace to all.

Amen.

+Deo Gratia
The Rev. Benjamin Larzelere III
Pastor

Christmas Day
Friday, December 25, 2009
10.00 am, Mass of the People

Complete with the Preacher's Notes.

GOSPEL: John 1.1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

1 Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. 2 οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. 3 πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν 4 ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων· 5 καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.

6 Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης· 7 οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. 8 οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. 9 Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. 10 ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. 11 εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. 12 ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτὸν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, 13 οἳ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν.

14 Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας.

In The Beginning

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

It's Christmas Morning and most of us are exhausted. The leaders of the liturgy((the Organist and the Pastor)) have been at this now since 5.30 pm yesterday. The whole set of three Masses reminds me of the 24-hour Yom Kippur Services (with fasting, although we do not at Christmas!) in Judaism. We only get to go home to sleep after the Midnight Mass which means usually we're in bed around 1.30 am or so.

While we are tired, most of the people who come to the People's Mass are not. There are visitors and tourists as well as members of the congregation for whom this is THE Christmas Service ... so it is not a time to slack off on the effort of preaching.

Since this year was a Trilogy, it seemed important to provide a review at the beginning, rather long, but it gives us a chance to place ourselves into the liturgy where we can hear and experience the truth of the phrases; and, we are reminded that faith is experiential above all else.

Also, this Sermon is a different style than the other three, most remarkably different from the first one at the Mass of the Angels last evening. Personally I think it's quite disjointed, but that is the topic itself as the reader will see. Somewhere in the various things almost "thrown" upon the congregation, there is Christmas Gospel.

I.

There are three Christmas Masses: The Mass of the Angels (which took place last evening), the Shepherd's Mass (also known as The Midnight Mass), and the Mass of the People ... or the Christ Mass, from which of course we have our word *Christmas*.

For the Sermons at these three services this year, I decided to preach a trilogy based upon the three significant phrases which we hear in the readings of the Christmas Gospel: twice from the Gospel of Luke (last evening) and once from the Gospel of John (this morning). The three significant phrases are:

- I. *In those days* ("In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus ..."), the phrase Luke uses to set the story of the Birth of Jesus into human history. What happens at Christmas is that we come to the Story (the Christmas Gospel) with the hope that there is a connection between the truth *in those days* with our lives *in these days*. And the Good News of the story is that there is indeed such a connection.
 - II. *In that region* ("In that region there were shepherds living in the fields ..."), the phrase Luke employs to cement the Birth of Jesus into humanity, that this is no insignificant event, but heralded with first one angel and then a million ... with the night sky lit up and resounding as never before, the promise, the declaration, the Good News of the story is that if to field hands on the hills in Judea, then as the Angel proclaimed, it is *good news of great joy for all people ... that is everyone ... everyone, no one is excluded.*
- And now this morning
- III. *In the beginning ...*

Here begins the Sermon proper.

II.

The worst thing in the world, I think, is to live a life of discontinuity ... being disconnected ... being detached, disjointed, disengaged. And when this happens that we are disconnected from the world, from those around us, even from ourselves ... it is a horrible feeling, a terrible thing.

Because it means that we have lost relationship. To be disconnected is to be severed from the nurturing things of living ... things that we take for granted, family, friends, spouse, partner, parents, children, employment, community, world.

We know how this feels. It makes us ask questions like, *Does anyone care about me?* or *Does it matter what I think or say or do?* and when we get down to the ultimate questions it turns into things like *Is there really a God who loves me and cares about me and this world, this humanity?*

Living discontinuously means no real life at all, not attached to anything, anyone ... removed from what is taking place around us.

It happens a lot at this time of the year ... the Blue Christmas Season, the Holiday of Darkness (literally, short days, long nights ((at least here in the Northern Hemisphere)) with all the Seasonal Disorders thereunto ... all manifestations of discontinuity.

The lengthy overemphasis upon this *Season* which goes by many names (Christmas Season, Holiday Season, Shopping Season, and many more) and the subsequent depression which follows since for most people it ends at Midnight tonight is well documented.

And yes, we know that Christmas is not a Day it is a Season, Twelve Days in fact, and ends not tonight but on January 6, the Epiphany of our Lord ... we have to be honest and say that we have not been able to change very much the world out there which thinks otherwise.

On the First Sunday of Advent, we award the Christ Lutheran Church Anachronistic Awards ... given out to people who discover the most inappropriate examples of *Christmas* decorations and things far too in advance of the Feast of Christmas itself. The winners this year went to people who found instances not only in August, but also in January of last year, and the ultimate was someone who found a Department Store here in our City which was taking down the Christmas Decorations in its store, *three days before Christmas itself!*

I'm certain that if you go into some stores tomorrow, you will find displays already in place promoting Valentine's Day ... cards and candy already sitting before you to help you become even more disconnected.

OK, here comes the Good News. It's the whole point of the Sermon, and in fact this Christmas Day.

III.

Knowing all this discontinuity in the back of our minds, maybe in the front, perhaps deep in our hearts ... we find ourselves sitting in the Peoples' Mass on Christmas Morning. We find ourselves sitting in the middle of a Gospel that was written after the other three, is completely different from the one we read last evening, and is – I want to tell you – all about *continuity* ... being connected, being in relationship, being held in care and compassion and understanding and acceptance.

And it all starts in those wonder three words of that phrase *In the beginning*.

It's a old early hymn of the followers of Jesus, these verses we have read from John's Gospel. It speaks of the tradition of the understanding of *Wisdom* the companion of God, spoken of here as the *Word*.

God's Wisdom was pictured in wonderful images in Proverbs (probably the best example) and is in fact used by Jesus in his preaching ... for example, Wisdom sends prophets to Israel as she sent John the Baptist and Jesus himself; the image of Wisdom is behind the cry to Jerusalem about having wanted to gather her children as a hen gathers her chickens.

Wisdom (the Word) is the companion of God says the author of John's Gospel, and was in the beginning with God, and was so close to God that in fact Wisdom and God (the Word and God) were identical.

And then a wonderful thing happened, says John ... Incarnation! It became human. Or as he writes himself in verse 14: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

That is the Christmas Gospel in a sentence. The Word (Wisdom, Companion of God, so close to God that she cannot be differentiated from God) becomes human, becomes Jesus ... *lived among us*.

Meaning?

That in matters of discontinuity and being disconnected, God chooses to end the breach, to bring God and humanity into unity, into relationship, into loving and caring about each other. And it has a name, Jesus.

Jesus is the closest touch we have with God, and it is not a touch of condemnation (as in *you wretched sinner and horrible person!*) but always it is a touch of love and compassion and acceptance.

In Jesus life makes sense, life makes connections, life makes wholeness. “To have a relationship of closeness to Christ is to have a relationship of openness to God and share his (eternal) life.”³

The Christmas Gospel is good news, that in spite of the efforts of many to make the world stick together and failing most miserably in the task, there is another way, and that way is to let God and humanity be together in the way it was to be and when that happens, then life becomes whole, wounds are healed, relationships are restored, and best of all you and I can bask in the warmth of this Holiday for Twelve Days and even beyond.

(And now, the Prayer.)

IV.

Let us pray.

O God who delights in the presence of all of your children,
grant us grace so that we can accept this great gift
you have bestowed upon us,
the gift of Jesus Christ.

Let us embrace Jesus.

Dispel the world's burden,
remove oppression,
bring good news of your peace to all.

Amen.

*+Deo Gratia
The Rev. Benjamin Larzelere III
Pastor*

³ William Loader, website quotation: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkChristmas.htm>