

The Festival of the Holy Nativity of Our Lord  
St. Luke 2:15-20: "What Comes after Christmas?"  
December 25, 2020 | Jerico Evangelical Lutheran Church

**In Nomine Iesu**

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EXORDIUM

The darkness of winter weighs on us. It can seem like the long, warm days of summer will never return. We can experience a similar darkness in our spirit. We feel like each day brings more bad news. Nothing seems to come easy or work out right. We grieve the loss of better times. A dark cloud hangs over us. We can't imagine feeling happy and joyful again.

Sometimes this darkness is due to wrongs we have done that we are unable to fix. We sinned against someone or against our own conscience, and the memory sticks with us as though it happened yesterday. Or we carry wounds from the sins others have committed against us, and the hurt still cuts deep.

This darkness around us and in us is the reason God sent His Son to take on our flesh. More than 700 years before Jesus' birth, the prophet Isaiah described the effect His coming would have: *"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"* (Isa. 9:2). About 400 years before Jesus' birth, the prophet Malachi referred to Him as *"the sun of righteousness [who] shall rise with healing in its wings"* (Mal. 4:2).

Jesus is *"the light of the world"* who came to bring *"the light of life"* to us who were lost in the darkness of sin and death (Joh. 8:12). He came to shine His healing light into our world of pain and sadness and to send His bright beams of grace into hearts full of turmoil and despair. His coming ushered in a glorious new day of hope and salvation for us that the darkness cannot overcome (Joh. 1:5).

Living in this light, we now rise and sing our festival hymn, "Rejoice, Rejoice This Happy Morn!" (#142):

Rejoice, rejoice this happy morn!  
A Savior unto us is born,  
The Christ, the Lord of glory.  
His lowly birth in Bethlehem  
The angels from on high proclaim  
And sing redemption's story.  
My soul,  
Extol  
God's great favor;  
Bless Him ever  
For salvation.  
Give Him praise and adoration!

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*The sermon text for today is taken from the second chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. We read as follows in Jesus' name:*

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. / And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them. <sup>(KJV)</sup>

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)*

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In Christ Jesus, the Son of God, whose coming in the flesh as a little Baby is the most monumental event in human history, dear fellow redeemed:

It's natural to feel a bit of a letdown after Christmas. There was so much to do leading up to it: decorating the house, buying and wrapping presents, mailing cards, baking the favorite treats. Then suddenly, Christmas has passed by. The brightly wrapped presents under the tree have all been opened. The beautiful plates of cookies have turned into extra insulation around the waist. The decorations are put away. And the warmth and anticipation of the Christmas season gives way to the harsh cold of winter.

But the days after Christmas do not have to be a letdown. I don't think it was for the people who played a part in the story of Jesus' birth. Take the shepherds. They didn't see Christmas coming. All of a sudden, an angel appears to them at night telling them the "good tidings of great joy" that the Savior, "Christ the Lord," had been born in Bethlehem. The angel tells them to go to town and look for a Baby "wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." And if that wasn't stunning enough, then the sky fills with a vast number of angels singing praises to God.

Imagine the wide eyes and open mouths of those shepherds. As soon as the angels disappeared, they must have given each other the look of: "Did that just happen!?" And then, bubbling with excitement, they all talked at the same time, stumbling over their words, "Let's go to Bethlehem!" "The Savior is here!" "The Lord has told us!" They took off as fast as they could.

Now we might have the idea that there was just one little stable on the outskirts of Bethlehem, and the shepherds went right there. But scholars suggest that it would have been common for the people of the day to have livestock in rooms or sheds adjoining their homes. The excited shepherds could have knocked on any number of doors in their search for the Baby Jesus.

How do you suppose those conversations went? *Knock, knock.* The owner of the house answers sleepily or with apprehension: "Yes?" Then the panting shepherds: "Is there a baby here?" | "Do you know what hour of the night it is?" | "Please! Is there a baby here? The Savior, the

Christ, has been born!" Or maybe the stable entrances were obvious and the shepherds peaked through doors and windows looking for the sign the angel gave them.

They continued their excited search until they finally found Mary, Joseph, and the little Lord Jesus. There He was, "*wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.*" The shepherds knew they were not worthy to lay eyes on the Christ-Child. Here was the fulfillment of God's promise. Even in this humble setting, they stood on holy ground. Joseph and Mary must have been surprised by these unexpected visitors. They were even more surprised when the shepherds told them what they had seen and heard out in the fields.

After looking upon their Savior, the shepherds couldn't keep their excitement to themselves. Maybe they even stopped by the same houses they had been at before. *Knock, knock.* "Not those crazy shepherds again!" They would not be silent. They told everyone what they had experienced. They returned to their work, "*glorifying and praising God*" for all He had so graciously revealed to them.

And that is the last we hear about these shepherds. They figure so prominently in the revealing of Christ's birth, and then they disappear from the biblical account. What do you suppose the day after Christmas was like for them? We can assume it wasn't just another day on the job. They didn't put away the vision of the angels and the visit to the manger like we might put away our ornaments and nativities. Christmas had changed them. Nothing would – or could – be the same for them again.

They must have kept turning over every detail in their minds. They talked with one another about what this all means. If they were not students of the Scriptures before this, I suspect they became dedicated ones now. I wouldn't be surprised if they returned to visit the Baby Jesus and watched Him grow. Might they have brought their best wool for His baby bed? And they kept telling the people they met about this good news.

I'm sure there were at least some who despised them. They grew tired of the angel stories and the talk of a special Baby in a manger. Why would God give these dirty shepherds such a privilege? They told the shepherds to keep it to themselves and stop pedaling their dreams and hallucinations. "You just worry about your sheep, and leave us alone!" But how could the shepherds stay silent? They were telling the truth! How could they not share these "*good tidings of great joy,*" which were meant for "*all people*"?

Whether or not the shepherds faced exactly this opposition, you and I certainly do. God has had mercy on us and revealed to us the salvation Jesus won for us. The Holy Spirit has brought us to faith in Him through the powerful Gospel and assures us that all who trust in Jesus will have eternal life. There is nothing better we could give to the people around us. There is nothing they need more than this.

And yet, we are sometimes reluctant to share the glorious hope we have. We doubt our ability to explain the Gospel truth. We worry what our friends and acquaintances will think of us if we talk about Jesus. What if they make fun of us? What if they accuse us of trying to force our religious beliefs on them? What if they threaten to harm us if we keep speaking up? We don't want to stand out; we want to fit in.

But the truth is the truth, whether it is welcome or not. As the apostles Peter and John said to the angry Jewish council: *“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard”* (Act. 4:19-20). It really all boils down to the question of whether God took on our flesh to save us or not. If He did – if what the Bible tells us about Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection is true – then we cannot keep this good news to ourselves. Then we cannot act like these things have not happened.

We can take our cue from the shepherds. The day after Christmas was no letdown for them. It was more than the dawn of a new day. It was the dawn of a new era, the era of God’s forgiveness, grace, and salvation, and the beginning of the countdown to the final day of redemption. We can also learn something from Mary. *“Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.”* We don’t move past Christmas, not even in a few weeks or a month. We keep Christmas with us by pondering it in our hearts.

We ponder the depths of God the Father’s love for us, that He would send His Son to be our Substitute and Savior. We ponder our Lord’s great humility, that He would lower Himself to become our Servant so that He might lift us up to glory. We ponder the wondrous exchange, that Jesus took on our sin in order to give us His righteousness. We ponder the compassion and mercy the Lord still has for us in visiting us in every trouble, pain, and sadness.

Jesus was born to save us. He was born to give us rebirth and new life. The shepherds praised God for this Savior, and so do we. Christmas Day may come and go each year. But God’s love for us and the salvation Jesus has won is the same *“yesterday and today and forever”* (Heb. 13:8).

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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