

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

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What I want to suggest on this holy night is that we make a very great mistake if we approach the gospel Nativity accounts as stories that recount factual events. When we do this, we miss the point, and we distort and misunderstand the purpose of the narrative. No one at the time would have asked whether or not the events being described actually happened in the way detailed in the account. They were looking for other elements, more important ones. Because these stories are, in a crucial sense, like parables. They tell a story, and the story reveals truth in a very dramatic and memorable way, but there is no effort here to give us a scientific and historically precise account of the birth of Jesus. This would have seemed absurd to the listeners and readers gathered around to hear this story.

Here is one way to think about this: when we hear the parable of the Good Samaritan, we don't say to ourselves: "I sure hope that really happened, or there isn't any point in telling that tall tale!" No! We know that this story is revealing truth in a way that is very real and very moving. This is something we're going to remember. We aren't drawn back to the Christmas story over and over again because we know we can rely on its telling us the precise location of the inn where there was no room, or because it tells us it was an inn with one or two stars indicating the quality of the accommodations, or because we can be certain that Mary rode on the back of a donkey or a horse or walked on her own two feet.

These things are utterly inconsequential in view of what's really being conveyed. Stories, after all, are how we transmit the culture and how we recall and communicate family history and moral lessons and the beliefs that bind us together as people of a particular tradition. The more compelling the story, the greater our interest and our capacity to remember it and to wish to have it retold time and time again. And these stories are simply magical.

The call to Mary represents a kind of ultimate example of God's call to the modest among us, the faithful, those least expected to be chosen but whom God knows to be his trusted servants. And ours is a God of the unexpected! A God who makes choices that can seem

unimaginable but which turn out to have been completely on target. Our God chose Mary, a virgin betrothed to a carpenter —— someone of little consequence in the grand scheme of things, a person of no apparent substance —— to be the mother of Jesus, and this woman completely alters our view of Jesus and of what is occurring in this story.

Jesus does not come from a royal line but rather from peasant stock. If Emmanuel means “God with us,” then this Messiah will be united with humanity in the fullest sense. His mother is a young unmarried girl who lives in a backwater village. The child, born in a stable, because there was no room in the inn, offers little promise that he will amount to anything. But our God is with us in a radically inclusive way. His love encompasses a pregnant girl with a suspect background in a society with hard and fast rules about purity. Thus, when Jesus is called Son of God, the implied message is that Caesar is **not** the legitimate son of God. There could not be a more powerful message, and if we miss it, we miss the whole point!

Advent prepares us for the coming of an unexpected Messiah, the surprise ending to the Nativity story, God once again confounding our assumptions, but when we open our hearts to that unforeseen outcome, it promises to set us free from many ills that plague our lives. Our God cares about his Creation, and he continues to enter into human history to demonstrate his love and his purposes for us.

We see this in a spectacular way in the stories of the Nativity of our Lord which are **resplendent with light**. In Matthew, the star of Bethlehem shines in the night sky to guide the wise men to the place of Jesus’ birth. In Luke, the night is filled with light, radiant with the glory of the Lord, as angels bring the news of Jesus’ birth to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks.” Light is an archetypal symbol, “imprinted in human consciousness from ancient times.” Long before the time of Jesus, the Old Testament stories featured light as the first creative act of God.

The Israelites were led in the wilderness by a pillar of light. In the Psalms, God’s word is likened to a “lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” In Isaiah, light is associated with the coming of the ideal king. And, of course, Hanukkah is a celebration of light as the winter solstice approaches.

Perhaps the most familiar words of Luke are those relating to the angels appearing to shepherds watching over their flocks by night. In the Bible, angels help us interpret the

signs God sends to his people, so there could not be a better way to announce the importance of what is happening here than to fill the night time with light, radiance, luminosity, glory, and revelation. The message of the angels expresses basic Christian beliefs about Jesus — that he is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Lord.

But there is another reason to make these pronouncements in such a glorious way: the Romans regularly spoke of an imperial theology in which the emperor is Lord, Son of God, and Savior, so this provides a counterpoint. Jesus is the real Son of God, not Caesar. Augustus claimed to have brought peace to the Mediterranean world by ending civil war, but a Roman peace was still dependent on military power and continuing warfare. What Jesus was offering was peace based on justice, not peace based on oppression and violence.

The first people to learn of the birth of Jesus, then, are the shepherds, and they are marginalized people from the peasant class, the group experiencing most dramatically the oppression and exploitation so intimately tied up with rule by Rome and the client monarchs in her outposts. The shepherds would clearly be among the “lowly” saluted by Mary in the *Magnificat* (Luke 1: 52-53), and they also recall David keeping the flock of his father Jesse (in I Samuel 16: 11).

The good news thus comes first and foremost to the poor and despised which is consistent with the way Jesus is portrayed in both Matthew and Luke, as well as in Mark. Recall that Jesus spent most of his ministry in the countryside preaching to peasants. Luke tells us that his message was good news for the poor, “release to the captives,” “sight to the blind,” and a signal “to let the oppressed go free.”

Luke’s message is also about the fulfillment of prophecy. We see this especially in Mary’s *Magnificat* canticle. When Mary says “God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly,” her words recall those of Hannah, the mother of Samuel:

“The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength, Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil...The Lord makes poor and makes rich, he brings low, he also exalts.” And Mary makes clear the fulfillment of prophecy in her memorable words, “God has helped his servant Israel, in

remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Which takes us back to Abram (later called Abraham) who bravely followed the Lord’s instructions even when he had no idea where it would take him. “Now the Lord said to Abram: Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen. 12: 1-3) This is the promise being fulfilled in Advent and in the Nativity of Our Lord.

At this darkest time of the year, the light of Christ is coming into the world, and the darkness cannot overcome the glory of God’s unfolding love for mankind.

If we ask what --- in the end --- we can take away from these *oh-so-familiar* stories, the answer might be this: that what might bring us the greatest grace is to reflect on and remember that what we’ve prepared for (in Advent) is the Incarnate Word of God who comes into our broken, often inhuman world to *be* with us – to be *like* us, to *share* in our lives.

*The Word of God comes again and again...inviting us to recognize that presence in our hearts; to offer us strength in working for peace; to help us bear witness to God’s presence in our lives as Mary did; to know we are blessed. Take time – make time, even amid all the frenzy of Christmas...to look at those gathered around you; to thank God for coming to dwell with us; to consider with a deeper heart those who are in need of the love and understanding you can give. The Incarnate Word of God comes today, as a newborn child, as old and unfailing as eternity” itself.*

*O God, you (do indeed) make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ...grant (we pray) that we may joyfully receive him as our Redeemer....who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen*

I wish you every blessing of this holy season.

AMEN