**December 31, 2023 Luke 2:1-20**

 ***Tis A Season***

**Scripture:** *Luke 2:1-20 NRSV*

*(1)In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. (2)This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. (3)All went to their own towns to be registered. (4)Joseph 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. (5)He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. (6)While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. (7)And 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. (8)In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. (9)Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. (10)But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: (11)to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. (12)This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." (13)And 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!" (15)When 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." (16)So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. (17)When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; (18)and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. (19)But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. (20)The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

**Notes:**

1. Many people believe ***Christmas*** begins after Halloween.
	1. Christmas is ***NOT*** a day; it is a ***season***.
	2. Christmas ***begins*** after sundown on Christmas Eve.
	3. Christmas begins after ***sunset*** on Christmas eve.
	4. There are 12 days from Christmas day until ***Epiphany***.
2. What should we ***contemplate***?
	1. ***Contemplate*** what happened on that very first Christmas.
	2. Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem for the census.
	3. They arrived in Bethlehem, where their child was ***born***.
3. Joseph and Mary knew that this birth would not be ***ordinary***.
	1. They knew that their son would ***fulfill*** ***prophecies***.
	2. They knew that this baby was also the ***Son*** of ***God***.
	3. This little boy was the ***King*** of all creation.
4. What makes us ***come*** ***back*** to this story?
	1. This story continues to be ***relevant***.
	2. We continue to ***remember*** the birth of Christ.
	3. We continue to talk about Jesus' birth.
5. On that night, God became like ***us***.
	1. God began to ***experience*** what we ***experience*** – just as us.
	2. Our God is a ***living*** God.
6. God ***KNOWS*** how we feel and what we are going through.
	1. God promised to ***NEVER*** leave us alone in our despair.
	2. The greatest gift is God ***coming*** and ***living*** as one of us.

**Script:**

Songwriters, singers and musicians sing, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year”; “Tis the season to be jolly”; “Have a holly jolly Christmas”; and, celebrate “The twelve days of Christmas”. Every year about this time, somebody on Facebook will post the symbolism of that song and what each character represents; and to be very honest I am always encouraged that somebody takes the time to do it.

But just how long should we celebrate Christmas; when should our Christmas festivities begin, and when should they end? When does the Christmas season begin and when should it be over. DO you stop listening to Christmas songs on Christmas day or are you one to hang on longer. When does your Christmas tree, if you do set one up, when does it come down? When do we stop celebrating the birth of Jesus?

Today we will be reading the Christmas story as recorded in Lukes’s gospel, chapter 2 verses 1-20. As we hear the Story of Christ’s birth from Luke, I ask you to listen closely to the miraculous events of this event and consider the way we celebrate this time of year? Stand with me as we share in the reading of Luke 2:1-20

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As I prepared this week, I came across a story of a minister, ministering in New York City, He was headed to his Christmas day service. He mentioned walking from his Greenwich Village apartment to his church in Manhattan. It was roughly 9:30 am as he headed to the church that he walked past an apartment building. There he noticed a Christmas tree that someone had thrown away. It’s 9:30 on Christmas morning and already, the lights had come off, the tinsel removed and every decoration gone from the tree. He looked at the tree neatly disposed of next to the building’s dumpster. How sad is this; 9:30 Christmas morning and the celebration is over, cleaned up, and put away until next year. Perhaps the thinking is, “Whew, I’m glad that is over. I only have a few days to plan for New Years eve, and New Years day; I have a party to plan.”

To be very honest, I am surprised we do not see this more often. Many people believe that the Christmas season begins as soon as the Halloween displays are taken down and the Christmas displays go up. Soon after the end of October, we begin to hear the familiar Christmas songs playing over the store PA systems. If you watch commercial television you begin to see commercials with reference to Santa Claus, reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, and who doesn’t look on with nostalgia when we see the video of Suzy Snowflake. Who doesn’t giggle at the video of Hardrock, Coco, and Joe? And everybody sings along when Gene Autry sings Rudolf the rednosed reindeer? By Thanksgiving, the shopping season is in a fever pitch, as we have Black Friday sales, Cyber Monday Sales, and let’s not forget Small Business Saturday. If your Christmas Party is not planned by this time your chance of having anybody in attendance is very slim, because everybody’s calendars are full up of parties, activities, and get-togethers. By mid-December, our country has been so completely swamped by the “details,” of Christmas for such a long time, and has had to deal with so much pressure from commercial America, with its demand for bigger and better present buying, that the whole country is burned out on Christmas long before today.

Now is the time that the counter-cultural message of the Church MUST be the strongest. What might that message say? What do you think we should share to get the people’s attention? The Church’s message is this; Christmas is NOT a day, definitely not a day that ends as soon as the wrapping paper is gathered, bagged and disposed of. NO, Christmas is NOT a day, it is a SEASON. This season of Christmas does not begin in October, not in November, Christmas (the season) BEGINS after sundown on Christmas Eve. We had a small debate this past week at our dinner table as to when the Christmas season officially begins. And I believe Denny and I agreed to disagree, even if he was wrong.

Listen closely. For four weeks prior to Christmas Day we are in a season of Advent, which brings us repeated calls to be ready and to wait for the coming Messiah, the Savior of the World. We should have been watchful, we should have been preparing, and after sunset on Christmas eve, we lit the white advent candle, the Christ the King candle, and that is when the season of Christmas begins. And now, the Messiah is here, now the king of kings has arrived, and now all people should bow before his throne in humility and repentance.

We CANNOT just toss out the remaining part of the season, just because we need to prepare for the New Year. Instead we need to incorporate our New Years celebration into our Christmas season as we begin to enter into a new year with, hopefully, a renewed relationship with our Lord and Savior. We need to Celebrate the arrival and consider what this season means to each of us as Christians. This cannot be done in a few minutes and then tucked away in a box of decorations. There are 12 days from Christmas day until January 6th, the day we recognize as the day of Epiphany. During these twelve days we are called upon to contemplate what the birth of Jesus means to us. We are called to contemplate this meaning all the time, but in this season particularly it is vitally important to our faith.

So What should we contemplate? Luke’s telling of this story is aimed at two very different yet equally important messages. First, what happened on that very first Christmas eve. A Man named Joseph took his young wife, Mary, and they traveled from their home in Nazareth to be registered for the census. It was commanded by the government that each male return to their ancestral home, and Joseph’s was Bethlehem, the City of David. If there was a nationwide census in this country that – for some reason – required all people to go back to their ancestral home in order to be counted, I dare say that there would be a lot of traveling in and out of this country (as well as a lot of family argument about where to go).  But travel we would, just as Joseph and Mary did.

After they arrived in Bethlehem, the most ordinary and yet extraordinary thing happened.  Their child was born.  Any of you who are parents know just how extraordinary the birth of YOUR child was, even when you looked at the very ordinary occurrence of childbirth in general.  The birth of a child – especially a first child, because it is such a new experience – is an amazing thing to the parents, but to the rest of the world, not such a big deal.  In this country, there is a baby born every 8 seconds.  It literally happens all the time. But this child is different, this birth is different, Joseph and Mary knew that this birth would not be ordinary; even to people other than themselves. Joseph and Mary knew that the birth of their son would be extraordinary and would fulfill prophecies from the prophets, but especially the prophecies of Isaiah. “*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6 NRSV”*

Joseph and Mary knew that this baby, lying so helpless on a pile of straw; this little baby, born to working poor parents in a town that was unknown to most of the world; this little baby was not only their son, He was also the Son of God.  This most unassuming little baby boy, wrapped not in royal robes but in bands of unbleached linen; lying not in a royal bed chamber in a fine palace, but in a stable, surrounded by common farm animals; this little boy was the King of all creation.

We all know the story and no matter how I pitch it, no matter how eloquent my words, we know this story. But what makes us come back to hear this story year after year? What makes us come back to this story and hopefully consider its consequences to the world. That is the second amazing point of this story. This story continues to be relevant. Now consider this, 15 years ago a 16-year-old celebrity was in the news because she was expecting her first child at such a young age. She was roughly the same age as Mary was. Yet if I asked you who this young celebrity was, very few would know her and few would recognize her name. The paparazzi were all over the pregnancy of Jamie Lynn Spears, but I doubt anybody here would be able to tell me whether the baby was a boy or a girl nor even what the name was. Yet we continue to remember the birth of a Jewish infant born in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago; and we continue to talk about his birth and remember his name. Why? That is the most important aspect of his Story.

On that night, in the company of his parents, and maybe a few farm animals, God became like us, he became a human in the form of this child, as weak and vulnerable as infants in that day and age were. IN Bethlehem of Judea, on that night, God began to experience what we experience – just as we experience. Did he shiver in the cold, you betcha. Did he feel hunger, yes he did. Did he suffer from common illnesses of the day, I think so. We read through scripture and all the information we have tells us that God became flesh and blood and lived as one of us. Think about that for a minute or two. The same God who created the entire world, took upon God’s self our human nature and lived and died as one of us.  God became human and laughed and cried, and loved and lost, was hungry and full, happy and sad, cared for and lonely.  God experienced what WE experienced.  Never before, and I dare say never again, will a group of people be able to make such a claim.  Muslims have no such claim.  Mohamed was a Prophet, NOT God incarnate.  Jews have no such claim.  Abraham was our father, just he was theirs, and Abraham was a man, not God.  In all the world, only Christians lay claim to the fact that God became human and lived among us.  That is EXTRAORDINARY.

After that night so long, we cannot view God as some distant Deity, removed from our problems and concerns, untouched by the reality of how we live.  Our God is a living God.  God has given so many and such amazing blessings.  We have this world to live in, with all its grandeur and beauty.  We have people in our lives who we enjoy spending time with and sometimes make us laugh until we cry.  We have comforts that people of generations past have only dreamed of.  All of these gifts and more, given from the God of all.  Consider everything in our lives, this alone should cause us to give thanks to the God who cares about us so deeply.

But what about the others? But what about those who have horrible debilitating illnesses?  What about those who lost their jobs a week before Christmas?  What about environmental concerns; global warming, war and the other messes in this world?  That’s the other amazing thing about this story.  God never promised to fix all of the things in the world that are broken, at least not within our lifetime.  But God KNOWS how we feel and what we are going through.  God has EXPERIENCED what we experience.  And God has promised to NEVER leave us alone in our despair.

“*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. John 3:16 NRSV”* That’s the promise of the Incarnate God.  This extraordinary little baby grew up, lived a life of doing good and bringing a message of peace and justice to the people, and then He willingly laid down His life so that we might have life everlasting.

Don’t be in a great hurry today – or through the next couple of weeks.  If you get in too much of a hurry when you’re cleaning up on Christmas morning, you can throw away something important with the wrapping paper.  Don’t get in such a hurry that you throw out the greatest gift in history – God becoming human and living as one of us.  An extraordinary gift that we should celebrate and cherish.