

Christmas Day 2007
Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO
Text: Luke 2:1-20

The Simple Wonder

The first Christmas sermon was one of few words: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

In the years since the night of our Lord’s birth, that simple sermon has grown to countless volumes of comment. The glory of the heavens that flooded the Judean skies that holy night has become a festival of Christmas lights brightening neighborhoods and businesses throughout the world. The simple worship of shepherds in the presence of animals in a barn, the swaddling cloths and manger dark have disappeared beneath layers of wrapping paper and tinsel. Even the simplicity of Christmas and its Gospel has been lost along the way. John Shea describes the simplicity of Sharon’s Christmas:

**She was five, sure of the facts, and recited them with slow solemnity,
convinced every word was revelation. She said
they were so poor
they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat
and they went a long way from home without getting lost.
The lady rode a donkey, the man walked,
and the baby was inside the lady.
They had to stay in a stable with an ox and an ass
but the Three Rich Men found them**

**because a star lited the roof,
Shepherds came and you could pet the sheep but not feed them.
Then the baby was borned. And do you know who he was?
Her quarter eyes inflated to silver dollars.
The baby was God.
And she jumped in the air, whirled round, dove into the sofa,
and buried her head under the cushion
which is the only proper response to the Good News of the Incarnation.**

That was what the angel proclaimed, wasn't it? "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." That is where you find the Christ—not within the royal splendor of Jerusalem, but in the lowly squalor of Bethlehem; not in the palace of a king, but in a small Judean cattle cave; not in the incense-perfumed presence of a high priest, but in the company of smelly shepherds and in the dense aroma of a cow barn.

Often the simply wonderful message of the angel gets lost in the wonder of this season, lost often because we look in wrong directions. The simple manger and swaddling cloths get complicated by the lights, the shopping, the wrappings and ornaments, the crammed-full calendar. And we wonder what happened to the wonderful, perfect Christmas we had hoped for.

Take a look at the simple story as recorded by Luke, who simply tells the story of a humble birth in humble circumstance to humble peasant parents. A decree of Caesar for a tax increase brought Joseph and his young bride, Mary, down to Bethlehem, that ancient city of famous ancestor David. Little town of Bethlehem was crowded, inns filled, no vacancy signs everywhere. A barn would have to do for a birthing room. "And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and

wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger.” That’s how it happened—just that simple: a child was born just like the miracle of life that happens thousands of times a day. But this was different. A halo of activity surrounded the humble setting.

Shepherds tending flocks of sheep in midnight darkness suddenly were bathed in terrifying light. The voice of heaven’s angel preached the simple sermon and the heavens echo with the Gloria Carol of cherubim and seraphim. All of this pointed to the fact that this Child is Christ, our God and Lord. The sleeping infant is Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. The fullness of time had come and God had “sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” (Galatians 4:4). The Word has become flesh to dwell “among us.” God, who in many and various ways, had spoken by the prophets now speaks to us in the most glorious revelation of them all—through His Son. The simple wonder of Christmas is that this infant, this virgin-born of Mary, is our God! That makes Christmas simply wonderful!

If the Christmas Gospel tells us that the child of Bethlehem is not an ordinary child, it is more concerned to tell us that the God of heaven is not an ordinary God. That the infant is our God and Lord is a fact that could terrify us. That God has become an infant, appearing in human flesh and bone, that He has taken the form of a servant, made in the likeness of men—that fact brings us comfort and joy. In all the record of deities that humans have created you cannot find a god like this God, the Creator who becomes a creation. This God does not remain beyond the earshot and heart-beat of our human need and tears. This God in Christ comes not to speak a

word of vengeance, nor to execute judgment. Rather He assumes our human flesh and blood to take the burden of our guilt upon Himself and save us from our sins and our death.

This fact makes Christmas simply wonderful—this man Jesus receives sinners! He has come to be the Savior of the world and not for a select few. In Christ we have a Savior sent from God who is our brother, a Savior who can be touched with the grief of our infirmities. There is no greater consolation God has given us than this fact: He became a man, a child, a baby—to bear our sins and to save us. This is the simple wonder of it all, that God has come from the other side of majesty and glory so that we can see Him on our side in swaddling cloths and in a manger. The simple wonder of it all is that the way God did things is not the way we would have done things. Thank God that He did not follow our script but that He chose the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty. And this is what it took—not a dignified way, but the way of the manger and the way of the cross. For this is the Christ we need—not a mighty Conqueror of nations, but a Servant suffering for sinners.

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” It may be the last place we expect to find this God, but thank God, it is the place we find Him. We find Him among the lowly, the poor in spirit, the humble, the oppressed, the grieving. He comes to us along our pathways where we least expect Him: in the presence of the hungry and the thirsty, the rejected and the homeless, the lonely and the ill, the burdened and the bored. The joy of Christmas is not determined by the

extravaganza we can stage. Nor does that joy depend on our state of health or wealth. Christmas is a simple wonder in the simple way of sharing the love we see in Him who first loved us.

The simplest, yet the greatest, wonder of them all is that we believe that in the fullness of time, God fulfilled His promise, that God came to earth, that God became an infant human being to bear our guilt, to die our death for us, and to rise again to bring His life to us. We believe that He became a man and identified Himself with us, with you and me, so that through all eternity we can be identified with Him. Perhaps the greatest wonder of it all is the wonder that through God's Spirit we believe Him. And believing in Him makes Christmas simply wonderful and makes us wonder-filled. Watch out, sofa and cushion.

Henry V. Gerike