

Sermon – Luke 2:1-20
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Grace Lutheran Church
Christmas Eve – Year B
24 December 2020

“This Day”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. *These* have been difficult days. Today is a difficult day. I don't think I realized until this year just how central Christmas Eve is to my personal or pastoral piety. While there is blessing, to be sure, in a lighter schedule and great joy to be found in spending more time with my family, it has been difficult to prepare for today. Yes, I've grown accustomed to Sunday mornings spent with only a few people. But Christmas Eve? Today is almost too much. After nine months of pandemic; after searing reminders of ongoing racial injustice in our world; after a presidential election that just won't seem to go away; after watching an economy that continues to leaves far too many on the brink; after everything that 2020 has brought, today is a difficult day. I don't want to look at a camera at the back of the sanctuary. I want to look at you, dear children of God; to see the flickering lights of candles dancing in your wondering eyes as together we greet the newborn king. And I want to spend tomorrow in the warm embrace of extended family and dear friends. But I won't. And in all likelihood, neither will you. Today is a difficult day. These have been difficult days.
2. *Those* were difficult days, too; those days when a decree when out from the Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. Augustus had consolidated and expanded both his personal power and the territory of the empire in the decades leading up to this moment. Now, to better tax and thereby subjugate the people, he called for a census. No exemption granted

for a young pregnant woman and the man to whom she was engaged. Imperial powers tend not to care for the hardships they impose. Indeed, cruelty is not a byproduct of imperial policy. The cruelty is the point. But at just that point, that moment when Augustus sought to control the world and Quirinius governed in Syria; in just that place, the city of David to which Mary and Joseph were forced to travel; in just that moment of despair, when they realized that she would have to give birth to her firstborn son out in the open; just then, and just there, God burst into this world.

3. As it was in those days, so it is in these days: “To you is born *this day* in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” This day. I was recently reading a commentary by a theologian whom I admire a great deal, but who wrote something that didn’t seem right. At least not this year. Christmas Eve, they wrote, “is not a time for history.” In many years I might agree, at least to some degree. In fairness, this commentary was written prior to the pandemic’s dark days. And tonight certainly is not the night to spend time trying to reconcile disparate accounts of the first Christmas or hammer home every detail as historically verifiable. But tonight *is* a time for history, a time to remember that in a particular place, at a precise time, Jesus who is God was born to Mary, come to save us from our sin and bring us back to life. This night, this year, in these dark and difficult days, we are desperate for this story to be true. We don’t need, we have never needed, god in theory or Jesus as a grand idea. We need the child of Bethlehem, God born under the nose of Roman rule, the divine wrapped up now in our human flesh and fate, to be present for us today.
4. In that moment, God entered in, sung by the angels and greeted by the shepherds, watched over by Joseph and cared for by Mary. As in those days, so today: God in Christ enters in. Perhaps Jesus seems harder to see today as we are kept from gathering together, from hearing together, from singing together. Then again, the first Christmas was pretty sparse. The Magi

wouldn't arrive for a while. It was just Mary and Joseph, a handful of shepherds, some barnyard animals, and, perhaps, a little boy who looked at this young, exhausted family in the middle of the night and thought to himself, "I bet they'd really appreciate a drum solo right now." A small gathering in a dark, difficult time. And right there, wonder of wonders, cradled in the manger was the Light of the World staring back at them. Tonight, in the darkness of this night and in the long shadow of this year, we are invited to come and see. In small groups or alone, to come and see.

5. I imagine many of you watched and worshipped with the children of Grace at 4:15 and, if you haven't, I would encourage you to watch this service at some point during the Christmas season. Unable to stand and sing next to one another, the students had to come in one at a time to be recorded. One after another, with time and cleaning in between, they came. Standing alone, they sang the traditional carols we call the cross songs. With voices strong or shaky, with boldness or anxiety, they sang. Each only a single voice. In that time and place they were each alone. Gathered together for worship today, however, they were a powerful choir, echoing the songs of the angels and of creation itself, calling us to the manger to praise our God.

6. Christmas is a time to learn from children, these young ones who are better at seeing Jesus than those of us who fashion ourselves mature or worldly wise. As each child lifted up their own voice, trusting that God would hear it and weave it into the heavenly harmonies of this night, let us do the same. In whatever place you find yourself, at whatever time you view this service, with whatever voice God has given you, sing. Sing with the angels, "Glory to the newborn king." Sing, no matter if your voice be halting or thin, of that silent night when Christ the Savior was born. Sing, and light a candle in the night, joining your flickering flame to the bright light of salvation that has appeared; that appears again to you this night, right where you are. These are days of challenge and struggle, of isolation and illness. But these are not days

of hopelessness or despair. Here, now, in the middle of history God in Christ has entered in. This day is a day of light. This night is a night of joy. *This day* is born to you in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Wherever you are, Christ is present. For those who are suffering, Christ is present. For those who endure injustice and oppression, Christ is present. For you, Christ is present; in the promise of Christmas, God will never let you go. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.