

Sermon – Luke 2:1-20  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
Christmas Eve – Year A  
24 December 2019

“For You”

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

1. The presents are carefully laid out under the tree, a different wrapping paper for each member of our family. To better frustrate our children, they don't yet know which wrapping paper is theirs, but they'll find out soon enough. Tomorrow morning, clutching cups of coffee and watching through bleary eyes, their mother and I will watch them tear open the gifts that we bought with love and care. That's the point, isn't it? Goodness knows our children don't need more stuff. But a gift chosen and given with love, the right gift for the right person, brings joy. We'll point and say, "That one's for you," and away we'll go. Soon our living room will see our children's hands racing Hot Wheels across the floor and building LEGOs toward the ceiling; gripping new sports equipment and sorting through baseball and Pokémon cards. Gifts aren't just given. They're given *for you*.
2. Luke's Christmas Gospel ends with a gift but begins with something else entirely: a call from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. There's nothing quite so impersonal as being counted, given a number, particularly when it's to make sure you can be properly taxed by an occupying imperial tyrant. The Christmas story begins with business as usual – the powerful and strong seeking to dehumanize others, to take from them, to lord over them. It is for this reason that Joseph and his pregnant bride are forced to make the journey to Bethlehem. Rome's firm grip couldn't allow anyone to slip through its grasp.

3. Of course, the oppression of the weak by the mighty is just one of the features of our broken world, so filled with bad news. Part of the reason that our children will find such joy when they open their presents tomorrow is that they are unaware of, unburdened by, the cares of this world. From news headlines to our personal worries, there is so much that weighs us down. We bring much with us into this church tonight. Financial insecurity. Failing health. Fear for the future. And no doubt the simple but profound grief that the person you'd most like to share Christmas with, the loved one with whom you delighted to give and receive gifts, is no longer here. There is just so much darkness in our world.
  
4. In 1914, shortly after failing to win back the presidency, Theodore Roosevelt did the sort of thing that Theodore Roosevelt loved to do. He led an expedition to the *Rio da Duvida*, the River of Doubt in the Amazon, which was as of yet uncharted, although well known to the indigenous people who called it home. The journey almost killed him. One of the most oppressive aspects was the lack of sunlight on the rainforest floor. While there was great lushness in and above the canopy, hardly anything grew on the forest floor. Sunlight couldn't penetrate the darkness. For plants to live, they had to engage in a vertical race for survival. Trees and other flora pushed toward the sky, reaching to get out of the darkness and claim some precious light. Anything that couldn't grow high enough would, of course, die. While the ecosystem was doing what it was supposed to do, its darkness drove home the overall misery of the journey for Roosevelt and his crew, and it's a fitting metaphor for our lives and our world's condition. Have we not mis-imagined the world as a place where we have to compete with one another, to grow past one another, to need the failure of others to make our own success possible? Are we not overshadowed with the tall trees of grief and fear and need and pain? Yes, all the time. And try as we might, we cannot lift ourselves

up to the light. We are a people who walk in in darkness, who live in a land of deep darkness, just as it was for the people in Isaiah's day.

5. But this is not where we are left. God does not remain above the canopy of sin and death that separates us from God. No. In this land of deep darkness, the light begins to shine from within. The angel calls out to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." In Christmas, God enters in. Jesus is God's great gift to us, for in Jesus we behold God not wrapped in printed paper, but God wrapped up in our human flesh. Jesus, this very human baby born to Mary and Joseph, these two people who lived in the same darkness we do but found faith that God was doing something new. Jesus is the God we can touch, and whose touch heals us and gives us life. He journeys with us through the darkness, lighting our way back to God. The old emperor and so many other circumstances sought to dehumanize us, reduce us to a number. In Christ's life, death, and resurrection, we are rehumanized, resurrected, brought back to life for the first and final time.
  
6. There is, of course, something frightening about all this. After all, much of the darkness in which we live was created by us. Being given a Savior means that we need saving from our sin; we need to be saved from ourselves. Sin needs to be dealt with, and Jesus will grow up to do exactly that. But Jesus will do even this in the most surprising way, taking into his own flesh, his own person, the death that will bring us forgiveness and life. As the twentieth-century German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love. God makes us happy as only children can be happy. God wants to always be with us, wherever we may be – in our sin, in

our suffering and death. We are no longer alone; God is with us. We are no longer homeless; a bit of the eternal home itself has moved unto us.”

7. So come again with the angels and the shepherds to welcome the birth of your Savior. With Joseph, treasure the gift. With Mary, ponder what it means. And then go, tell, and give the gift of Jesus to this world. We can't make the darkness go away, but we can illuminate the world from within. In a little while you will be invited forward to receive the gift of Jesus, his very body and blood in, with, and under the bread and the wine. As Jesus is placed in your hands, note that not only is he given; he is given *for you*. Rather than unwrapping him, discover yourself wrapped up in his unending life. Jesus was born into this world to save it, and he has done exactly that. In him, God lived our life. In him, God died our death. In him, death is destroyed, and the darkness begins to dissipate. For you the gift is given. God picked it out just for you, knowing it's just what you needed. It's a gift chosen and given with love. Open it in faith. Share it with the world. Amen.

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