

“O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM”

“For Christ Is Born Of Mary”

Scripture Reading – Luke, 2:8-20

There were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger”.

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests”. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about”.

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

‘For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’

Isaiah, 9:6, NIV

This Advent series is based on the Christmas carol: ‘O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM’.

I imagine that for some of you this is a much-loved Christmas carol. I would like us to think of this season of Advent in terms of this theme. A carol is a joyful religious song or hymn.

Why do we have joy to offer to the world?

I like the way **G K Chesterton** answers this question in his book **‘ORTHODOXY’**. He writes, **‘THE MASS OF PEOPLE HAVE BEEN FORCED TO BE HAPPY ABOUT LITTLE THINGS, BUT SAD ABOUT BIG THINGS’**. He goes on to say that people have been born upside down and when they receive Christ, they are turned right side up. He writes that when they are stood right side up they realise that by its creed, joy becomes gigantic and sadness something special and small.

I hope that for you, Advent will allow your joy to become gigantic; and even though you may be sad about little things, you will be joyful about the big things and know which is which...

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Festivals\Advent\O Little Town Of Bethlehem\02 For Christ Is Born Of Mary

“FOR CHRIST IS BORN OF MARY”

Today, we consider the second verse of Phillips Brooks Christmas Carol...

*O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God, the King, and peace to men on earth.
For Christ is born of Mary; and, gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.*

1. A MESSAGE TO PROCLAIM

‘O MORNING STARS, TOGETHER PROCLAIM THE HOLY BIRTH’

‘An angel of the Lord appeared to them [the shepherds], and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord”.’

Luke, 2:9-11, NIV

What an amazing birth announcement on that first Christmas morning.

The shepherds were terrified, but their fear turned to joy as the angels announced the Messiah's birth. The shepherds ran to see the baby; then they themselves spread the word.

Gabriel announced to Mary that the Baby would be “THE HOLY ONE”.

Therefore, he would not share the sinful human nature of man. His body was prepared for him by the Spirit of God who ‘OVERSHADOWED’ Mary. The same word is applied to the presence of God in the Holy of Holies in the Jewish tabernacle and the temple. Mary's womb became a holy of holies for the Son of God.

‘You know he appeared that he might take away our sins. In him is no sin.’

I John, 3:5, NIV

Where there is no sinless sacrifice, there can be no atonement.

Where there is no atonement, there can be no new birth.

Where there is no new birth, there can be no hope of heaven.

The question is, if we have such a hope, why don't we want to tell it?

I do not go along with those who say that it shows that we have nothing to tell. Such people would have us questioning our own experience of Christ. I do not accept the line that others do not want to hear the news we have. Such people use that excuse in order not to share the Good News. But why would we not want to tell it?

‘Our churches are full of people who truly believe and want to follow the way of Jesus – but who cannot bring themselves to talk about their faith. “I would not know what to say” is the immediate reaction of many. Again there are those who are frightened to share their faith and experience because they do not want to embarrass their friends or be a ‘bore’. The truth is that

the timely word coming out of a genuine experience of Jesus Christ is never embarrassing and certainly never boring.'

Gavin Reid

*YOU can tell out the sweet story, YOU, yes, YOU.
Somebody's life will be brighter, Somebody's care will be lighter;*

YOU can tell out the sweet story, YOU, yes, YOU.

Sidney Edward Cox, SASB 384:Ch

'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.'

I John, 1:1-4, NIV

'A pastor had a phone call from an angry woman. "I have received a piece of religious literature from your church", she shouted, "and I resent you using this method to upset people!" "What was so upsetting about a piece of literature from a church?" the pastor asked calmly. "You have no right to try to change my religion!" the woman stormed. "You have your religion and I have mine, and I'm not trying to change yours!" "Changing your religion, or anybody else's religion, is not our purpose", the pastor explained. "But we have experienced a wonderful new life in Christ, and we want to do all we can to share it with others".

Many people (including some Christians) have the idea that WITNESSING FOR JESUS' means wrangling over the differences in religious beliefs, or sitting down and comparing churches. That is not what John had in mind. He told us that witnessing means sharing our spiritual experiences with others – both by the lives that we live and by the words that we speak.

A witness needs to have SEEN something... he must have seen Jesus.

A witness needs to KNOW something... he cannot give a second-hand account.

A witness needs to SAY something... he cannot be a silent witness.

A witness needs to BE something... he must speak no matter what the cost.

'Jesus said, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels".'

Luke, 9:26, NIV

In the second verse of the carol, we have the stars proclaiming the holy birth.

'After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him".

Matthew, 2:1-2, NIV

2. A MAJESTY TO PRAISE

'AND PRAISES SING TO GOD, THE KING, AND PEACE TO MEN ON EARTH'

'Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests".'

Luke, 2:13-14, NIV

'The first responsibility of every Christian is to worship God. It is, I believe, the first law of the soul. When we violate that law we put our souls in peril... Scripture bulges with the truth that God is to be the first and only object of our worship. From Genesis to Revelation the emphasis cannot be missed – God commands us to worship him.'

Selwyn Hughes

Worship happens when we come into his presence and sing to him.

'Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.'

Psalms, 100:2-4, NIV

In worship, we draw near to God, the one who has called us to worship.

When we meet for worship, we should assemble with the expectation of meeting with God. When we lose sight of that central purpose of worship, we begin to misdirect our efforts. We start to think in terms of getting something out of worship – good feelings, good singing, good teaching... – instead of worshipping God for what it does for him, and for what he gets out of it.

In worship, our major emphasis should not be on generating good feelings.

We should not think for one moment that we have not worshipped if we feel nothing. We worship God because he is deserving and worthy of our praise. We should worship because we want God. We want to experience a 'TRANSFORMATION THROUGH ADORATION' (G Kendrick).

'We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.'

II Corinthians, 3:18, NIV

*What actions can you take to prepare yourself to meet with God during worship?
How do you enter into the presence of the living God?*

*Praise, my soul, the King the Heaven, to his feet thy tribute bring;
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like thee his praise should sing?
Praise him! Praise the everlasting King.*

Henry Francis Lyte, SASB 17:1

3. A MISSION OF PEACE

'AND PRAISES SING TO GOD, THE KING, AND PEACE TO MEN ON EARTH'

'Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests".'

Luke, 2:13-14, NIV

Whatever kind of peace you are praying for this Christmas, God can supply it. When the entire world was in disruption, God brought his peace to that world through Christ.

'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'

Isaiah, 9:6, NIV

What peace can we find in Jesus, the Prince of Peace?

JESUS PROMISES PEACE WITH GOD

A peace for anyone and everyone who had received Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Because Christ came, you are a reconciled, beloved member of his eternal family. It began with the Incarnation – first seen in the stable in Bethlehem – and was sealed at the Cross – at Calvary.

'Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.'

Romans, 5:1-2a, NIV

We now have peace with God, which may differ from peaceful feelings such as calmness and tranquillity. Peace with God means that we have been reconciled with him. There is no more hostility between us, no sin blocking our relationship with him. Peace with God is possible only because Jesus paid the price for our sins through his death on the cross.

JESUS PROMISES PEACE WITH YOURSELF

This peace is for everyone who wants to grow in his or her love for Christ. As we meditate on the truths of God's Word and call upon him in prayer, we receive the peace that passes all understanding.

'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

Philippians, 4:6-7, NIV

Imagine never worrying about anything.

It seems like an impossibility; we all have worries on the job, in our homes, at school. But Paul's advice is to turn our worries into prayers. Do you want to worry less? Then pray more! Whenever you start to worry, stop and pray... God's peace is different from the world's peace. True peace is not found in positive thinking, in absence of conflict, or in good feelings. It comes from knowing that God is in control. Our citizenship in Christ's Kingdom is sure, our destiny is set, and we can have victory over sin. Let God's peace guard your heart against anxiety.

Daniel gives us a wonderful illustration of peace through prayer.

When the king announced that no one was to pray to anyone except the king, Daniel went to his room, opened his windows, and prayed as before. Note how he prayed: **'DANIEL PRAYED, AND GAVE THANKS BEFORE HIS GOD'** and he made supplication. Prayer... Supplication... Thanksgiving! And the result was perfect peace in the midst of difficulty! Daniel was able to spend the night with the lions in perfect peace, while the king in his palace could not sleep.

*Jesus came with peace to me, his strong arm was stretched to me,
Then my burden took from me – my Saviour.*

Agnes Parker Heathcote, SASB 379:Ch

4. A MINISTRY OF PROTECTION

'FOR CHRIST IS BORN OF MARY; AND, GATHERED ALL ABOVE,
WHILE MORTALS SLEEP, THE ANGELS KEEP THEIR WATCH OF WONDERING LOVE'

'Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?'

Hebrews, 1:14, NIV

'You, through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.'

1 Peter 1:5, NIV

God will help us remain faithful through whatever difficult times we must face.

We may have to endure trials, persecution, or violent death, but our souls cannot be harmed if we have accepted Christ's gift of salvation. We know we will receive the promised rewards.

'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.'

Romans, 8:35, 37-39, NIV

*As the Lord his children gathers, spreads his wings, and hides us there;
Thus protected, all our foes we boldly dare.*

Thomas Kelly, SASB 722:4b