

Christmas Eve

Dear Christian, be of good cheer; God is with us!

Cheer is not what the shepherds felt at the appearance of the angels. Fear is what they felt. When the sinner comes up against the holy, he rightfully fears. Zechariah felt fear when the angel appeared. So did Mary just like the shepherds. You may recall Isaiah's reaction to the holy:

Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts! (Is. 6:5)

Isaiah is a Christian. This is no unbeliever's reaction to God's holiness. God doesn't look at the outward appearance, but He looks into the heart of man in his natural state and this is His judgment:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick! (Jer. 17:9)

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in all the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Gen. 6:5)

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander These are what defile a person. (Mt. 15:19-20a)

Man cannot stand before the holiness of God, whether it is God Himself or one of His holy messengers.

But God did the incredible. He made it possible for a Holy God to dwell with His unholy people!

And since God is with us, our fear becomes joy just like with the Shepherds.
How does God do this?

First, he orchestrates history for His purposes.

Alexander the Great had conquered the known world and given it the Greek culture, primarily the Greek language. The Roman Empire then conquered the known world and brought order and stability.

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town." (Lk. 2:1-3)

This is Rome's way of bringing order and stability to the backwater country known as Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. You can't build roads and stock garrisons without taxes!

God orchestrates this so that the known inhabited world was under one government and everyone understood one language. The fullness of time had come as Paul says:

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman.” (Gal. 4:4a)

SO Joseph obeys the decree:

“And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.” (Lk. 2:4–6)

Jesus will be born in Bethlehem. This will fulfill the prophecy that God’s Messiah would come from Bethlehem as found in Micah 5:2:

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”

Now if God is going to orchestrate events, you would think it would be a big deal and be done in a big way, wouldn’t you? Imagine if Caesar Augustus were to visit Bethlehem. There would be a ton of fanfare. There would probably be some sort of tribute built, like a coliseum or a temple of one of the Roman gods. There would certainly be much celebration. And Caesar would certainly not sleep in a barn!

The greatest event in history would happen and hardly anyone would notice!

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:7, ESV)

Christ, our Lord, is born in a barn and placed in a feeding trough! The greatest event in history had the smallest of beginnings.

God announces this amazing event but who does he choose?

One of the most despised group of people you could imagine. Shepherds. I believe only Gentiles and tax collectors were despised more!

If Caesar visited Bethlehem, you know there would be trumpets blasting his presence and every important person in this region and even the surrounding regions would know!

Luther makes this observation in a Christmas Eve service: “See how God shows that He utterly disregards what the world is, has, or desires—and, furthermore, that the world shows how little it knows or notices what God is, has, and does.”

Dear Christian, be of good cheer. God is in control and orchestrates history for His purposes and our good!

II

Second, God does the unimageable and joins Himself to human flesh.

Jesus is 100% God and 100% human. He is two natures in one person.

God saves man by becoming Man.

As Luther says, “How could God have shown His goodness more than that He sank Himself so deeply into flesh and blood, that He did not even despise the natural privacy but honored nature most highly where Adam and Eve brought it most miserably into shame?” (Luther Sermon)

Dignity was lost when Adam and Eve sinned. Jesus restores that dignity.

“For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.” (Rom. 5:17)

Man rejected God, but God does not reject man. God becomes man so that He might restore man to his rightful place of relationship with God.

The wood of the manger becomes the wood of the cross where Jesus paid for the wickedness of all men. Jew and Gentile alike... including you!

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” (Gal. 3:13–14)

This is the blessed exchange! Nobody puts it quite like Luther: “See, in this way Christ takes our birth away from us and absorbs it into His birth, and gives us His, that in it we might become pure and new, as if it were our own, so that every Christian may rejoice and glory in Christ’s birth as if he also, like Christ, had been born bodily of Mary.” (Sermon)

This only works if Christ is truly, 100%, man.

And Jesus is truly Man: He is born (Luke 2:7) and grew up (Luke 2:40). He became tired as when he rested by Jacob’s well (Jn 4:6) and prayed in Gethsemane (Mt 26:38). He slept like when He slept on the boat during a storm (Mt 8:24). He hungered like when He became hungry after His fast (Mt 4:2). He thirsted on the cross (Jn 19:28). He marveled at the centurion’s faith

(Mt 8:10). He wept over his friend, Lazarus' death (Jn 11:35) and over the stubbornness of Jerusalem (Lk 19:41). Jesus died on the cross (Lk 23:46).

Jesus became Man so that He might save all men.

If He was only a man, His death would not have sufficed for our sin.

His resurrection from the dead shows us that Jesus is not just Man. He is 100% God and 100% Man and his sacrifice for our sin was accepted by our Father in heaven.

Jesus is 100% God and 100% Man today. He made Thomas touch Him and see that He was no spirit (Lk 24:39). He ate fish in front of His disciples (Lk 24:42-3).

Dear Christian, be of good cheer. Your Lord is with you and knows you intimately like no one else can.

III

Third, God is with us in the Church!

“And the angel said to them, ‘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.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’” (Lk 2:10–14)

God makes us His children the same way He did with the Shepherds: by the pronouncement of Good News!

Luther notes that someone might object to this method: “Someone, however, might say, ‘Yes, I would certainly believe if an angel from heaven told me so.’ But that is saying nothing. Whoever does not receive the Word in itself will never receive it for the sake of the preacher, even if all the angels preached it to him. And whoever receives it because of the preacher does not believe in the Word, nor does he believe in God through the Word, but he believes the preacher and in the preacher. Therefore, his faith does not last long.” (Sermon)

We receive adoption as children of God by faith. This faith comes by hearing the Word. The Holy Spirit breaks our stony hearts and makes us Christians.

We have this misconception that the Word has to be preached dynamically for us to receive it. The Word is what matters, dear friends.

There's also an idea at Christmas that we have to decide if we have room for Jesus.

It is impossible for you to make this decision. In your natural man, you are dead in trespasses and sins. In other words, dead men make no decisions. The old man must be slain so that the new man can emerge and live righteously before God.

Luther describes this life well: “For a Christian life consists not in outward conduct, nor does it change anyone as to his outward estate, but it changes him as to his inward estate; that is, it gives him another heart, another spirit, will, and mind which does the same work which any person without such a spirit and will does.” (Sermon)

Do you ever wonder about how mundane the Christian life looks? The only thing that differentiates your works from that of the pagan is faith. Paul says whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Rm 14:23). As the Hebrews author says:

“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” (Heb 11:6)

Our life is not given meaning by what we do. Our life is given meaning by Christ Himself. We find that meaning at church because that is where Jesus is found.

Mary carried Jesus in her womb. The church now carries Jesus in Word and Sacrament.

Luther puts it like this: “The Christian Church retains now all the words of God in her heart and ponders them, comparing them with one another and with the Scriptures. Therefore, whoever would find Christ must first find the Church.” (Sermon)

Jesus establishes the church so that we might receive the forgiveness of sins and remain children of God:

“Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”” (Mt 16:16–19)

Dear Christian, be of good cheer. Your Lord forgives your sins and is with you in the Lord’s Holy Supper.

Merry Christmas! We truly can be merry!

Our fear is turned into joy as we ponder the miracle of the Incarnation of Our Lord and God.

May God richly bless you as you celebrate His Incarnation with family and friends.