

Date: December 24, 2020 Christmas Eve

Scripture: Luke 2:1-14, 15-20

Title: THE GRANDEST NIGHT SINCE CREATION

We all know what a special evening this is. Rosanne, age 11, wrote to Santa and said, “Do you know Jesus is the real reason for Christmas? Not to be mean, but he is.” Rosanne is right. Jesus is the reason for the season.

Years ago, there was a cartoon in the “Family Circus” comic strip. A little girl is depicted standing on a chair and looking down into an open drawer. Behind her is a crèche scene. It’s obviously Christmas. But in the caption, the little girl calls out, “Mommy, we forgot to put the baby Jesus in the manger on Christmas Eve. He’s still in the drawer.”

I hope Jesus isn’t left, in the drawer at your house. Sometimes, it’s difficult to keep our priorities, in the proper order. But that’s why we gather and worship tonight. Those who receive gifts this year, will do so, not because they’ve been good, but because they’re loved. And that’s the reason for Christmas, God sent God’s most important gift into the world, not because we were good, but because God loves God’s children, all God’s children.

I wish that I could have been present with my camera, that first Christmas. Can you imagine the pictures that could have been taken? Let’s begin with the first words in tonight’s lesson: “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree, that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to their own town to register.”

Now, Caesar Augustus would be the first picture I would have taken. Can’t you see him in his royal robes? Augustus assumed he was the most powerful man in the whole empire. Roman coins, bore a graven image of Caesar Augustus. A caption on the coin read: “son of god.” That’s interesting! It was believed by the Romans, that Augustus, the first of the Roman emperors, was divine, conceived by a serpent, as Augustus’ mother lay asleep in the temple of Apollo.

Augustus had thousands of Romans bow down at his name, tremble at his power; but he didn’t have a clue, that in a few short years, his reign would come to an end. Meanwhile, that very night, a babe would be born, who would reign forever King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Augustus didn’t have a clue, that this babe, who would be born in the small town of Bethlehem, in Judea, was the **true** Son of God.

Caesar Augustus, who thought he was so cunning and so powerful, didn’t realize he was simply a pawn, in the story of the first Christmas. Caesar Augustus issued a decree, that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Everyone was ordered to the town of their birth, to register. Thousands of people were uprooted from their homes, traveling many miles, mostly on foot, trying to find shelter in a town, where they might not have lived in decades.

But the joke was on Augustus. The prophet Micah hundreds of years before, had prophesied in writing (Micah 5:2) that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. But, that could only be accomplished, if Mary and Joseph had a good reason to travel 90

miles from their home in Nazareth, to Bethlehem. It was a long and arduous journey, and Mary was “great with child.” (KJV) The reason that motivated them to make that journey turned out to be, the census decreed by Caesar Augustus. Even Mary and Joseph, probably didn’t realize, that they were fulfilling an ancient prophecy, by going to Bethlehem. Someone far greater than Caesar Augustus, was controlling their destiny.

Augustus accomplished many fine things as the first Roman emperor, among them, a largely peaceful period of two centuries, in which Rome imposed order, on a world long torn with conflict. He built roads and vastly expanded the empire. In fact, what he really accomplished, though he wasn’t aware of it, was to make this vast area of the world, much more accessible to Christian evangelism. It wasn’t many centuries later, that the notoriously pagan Roman Empire, was known as the Holy Roman Empire. We owe a debt to Caesar Augustus, who thought he was all-powerful, but was really an unwitting instrument of God. So, Caesar Augustus, would have been the first picture I would have taken.

The second picture I would have taken, would be quite a contrast to the emperor’s magnificent palace. **It’s the humble stable, in which the holy babe, lay.** It’s always fascinated Christians, that when God came down to earth, God did so, in humble surroundings. A seminary professor, Malcolm Tolbert, wrote an article asking and answering the question, why Jesus was born in a stable. Tolbert wrote, “Had Jesus been born in a mansion on the hilltop, few people would have felt welcome, in God’s presence. But, God was born in a barn; anyone can go there. The lowly shepherds, didn’t hesitate to enter a stable, and bow before the Child. Then and now, anyone willing to humble themselves, may come to Jesus.”

As we reduce Christmas in our time, to an occasion for extravagant gift-giving, tinsel, and all manner of glitter, let’s consider what it means, that Christ was born, in some of the most deprived circumstances, in this world. The angel Gabriel came to a humble maiden, in an obscure village, called Nazareth, to tell her that she would bear a child, who would be called the Son of the Most High. She couldn’t foresee, that his birth, would be in a stable with cattle and sheep, as witnesses. Through the centuries, Christians have kept a consciousness, of Christ’s humble birth, as well as, a sense we, as God’s people, should have a sense of responsibility, for those who don’t share, in the affluence, we enjoy.

Mike Slaughter in his book, *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday*, tells us that in medieval times, “Christians would place candles in their windows to welcome the Christ Child on Christmas Eve, who was looking for places where he would be invited in. No one knew for sure, how he might appear. Perhaps he would come dressed in the rags of a beggar, or he might come as a poor and lonely child. Maybe he would come in the form of a person with disabilities, or as a homeless wanderer of the streets. It became customary, for devout Christians, to welcome into their homes, any of ‘the least of these’, who knocked at their doors on Christmas Eve. To turn away any, might have meant the rejection of the Christ Child, who had come in unfamiliar garb . . .” So, the second picture I would have taken, was that of a humble stable with cattle, sheep, a humble young couple, and their newborn son.

The third picture I would have taken, is of shepherds, living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. In the picture, an angel of the Lord is appearing to them, and the glory of the Lord is shining around them, and they're terrified. And the angel is saying to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, 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 appears with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

It's interesting, that the first thing that an angel invariably says in these biblical encounters is, "Don't be afraid" or "Fear not!" It must be a startling experience to encounter one of these messengers of God. But, this is an integral part of the Gospel, the idea that followers of Jesus, should not be afraid.

Fear is one of the most common emotions that human beings experience, fear of the unknown, fear of death, fear of failure, fear of losing your job, fear of doing the wrong thing and embarrassing yourself. The list can go on and on of things to fear.

The angels were proclaiming a message, that sooner or later, will speak to every heart: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." That's a message that gladdens, the heart of every believer.

Tonight's scripture of the Christmas story from Luke 2, adds a little bit of drama, when we come to the part, about the shepherds receiving the news of Jesus' birth. The angel says, "Fear not!" James Moore writes, "There are many messages of Christmas, but there is one, that everybody in the story received and receives. And it is, 'Fear not.' Do not be afraid. It seems that everybody needed to hear it." We to, need to hear it. The world can be a scary place. But the world is far less scary, to those who trust, in the message of the Christ child.

Three pictures, Caesar Augustus in all his earthly, but unsuspecting glory; a humble stable, where the true Son of God was born; and the shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night, when an angel announces to them, do not to be afraid, for a Savior has been born to them, in a stable in Bethlehem. No wonder a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace to those, on whom God's favor rests." It was the grandest night, since the creation of the earth. Let's fear not, and live in Peace as we Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Merry Christmas! Amen.