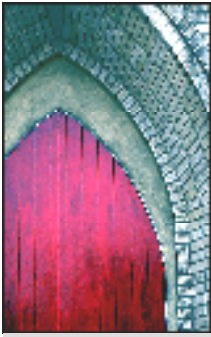


THE INCARNATION OF CHRIST

TEXT: LUKE 2:8-20 (ESV)



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Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

For the Little Kids:

Have you ever been camping? I love to go camping. I love hiking, crossing rivers, setting up my tent, building a campfire, and eating smores. But there is one aspect to camping that takes a little bit of getting used to. During the day, you're exploring the great outdoors. But when night falls, even the bravest boy or girl can begin to get a bit nervous. Why? Because it gets dark and you can't see anymore. But you can still hear. Sometimes when I'm out camping at night, I'm lying in my tent in the dark, and I hear sounds—strange sounds—like the

rustling of leaves on the ground outside my tent. Do you know what the sound of rustling leaves means? It means there's something rustling those leaves. But it's dark, and I can't see what it is. So my imagination takes over and paints the picture for me. Maybe it's a big black bear. Or a hungry lion or maybe Bigfoot. Or perhaps it's a giant armadillo! Oh, the terror!

What can I do when I'm hearing noises in the dark like that? I have something I take with me that makes even the biggest imaginary monster shrink down to size. It's called a headlamp. It looks a little silly, but it shines light wherever I turn my head. And do you know what I've found? Light is powerful.

Darkness can be scary not because there are monsters, but because I can imagine them. Light shows things as they really are. But when it's dark, our imaginations take over, and we can be afraid. Are any of you afraid of the dark? I still get that way sometimes, I must admit. But at Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus, and we're going to look at two qualities of Jesus that help us when we're afraid. Later we'll talk about Jesus as the Lamb of God (and we have a special present for each of you to help remind you of that this Christmas.) But the other point I want to help you see is that Jesus is also our Light.

For the past four weeks we've been lighting candles here on our advent wreath, counting down to Christmas. What has happened as the weeks have gone by regarding the brightness of the wreath? It's gotten brighter. And this is to symbolize how Jesus is the light of the world—shining in darkness, taking away our fear, assuring us that God is keeping us safe in His sight. How many candles have we lit so far? How many are left? When we light this last candle, there are no more weeks until Christmas! We call this last candle the Christ Candle—symbolizing that Jesus, the Light of the World, has come.

I need two helpers: one who can read and one who, like me, is afraid of the dark sometimes. I need help lighting this last candle which reminds us of the light Jesus gives, shining away all the darkness that might scare us. I want you to hear what Jesus said about this. Read these verses: Jesus said "I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness." (John 12:46) "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

For the Kids of All Sizes:

Some of us grown-ups are still afraid of the dark too, aren't we? We fear what we can't see. When you think of the future of your job, are you afraid? What about the future of your marriage? Of your kids lives and faith? Of your health? Who does not deal with a sometimes crippling anxiety? There is hope for you this Christmas—not simply in the fact that Christ has come (*though He has, and this will always be your greatest source of hope.*) There is also great hope in the details of how He came.

There are many facets to the Christmas story which show us God's design in every aspect of Christ's coming. In Proverbs 21:1 we read, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He will." In the verses prior to our text today, we read of how God had directed Caesar to take a census that would require Joseph and Mary to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem, fulfilling yet another prophecy. And once there, we see our God steering the shepherds working the Bethlehem fields to behold the Lamb who would take away their sin. The angel of the Lord tells them to look for the baby in the manger wrapped in swaddling cloths.

God uses a national census and swaddling clothes to announce to the greatest and least that Christ has come. That God orchestrated all the details of the birth of Christ is amazing itself! I want us to step into the world of the Shepherds today, and consider the wonder of the angel's appearing to them.

Luke 2:8-20

⁸And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. ¹⁰And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

¹⁵When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Born Where the Lambs are Kept:

The shepherd's job was to tend the animals that would be sacrificed to atone for the sins of the people. Yet because of their work, they were ceremonially unclean, and thus prevented from keeping the ceremonial law themselves. And because they were unclean, they were often seen as untrustworthy and irreligious. So an ordinary shepherd's life was rich in irony.

But a good shepherd's life was even more so. Jesus said a Good Shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep. He actually cares for the lambs that would die on the altar for the sins of the people who saw the shepherds themselves as unclean. This made the shepherd's lives, in effect, sacrifices too. They were outcasts because their work made them unclean, but their job was essential for the purification of the people who hoped God would accept a lamb on their behalf, though they themselves could not accept the shepherds who kept those lambs for them.

When the angel appeared to these marginalized outsiders, what did he say? He said, "Go behold the end of your life as an outsider." The angel uses three names for Jesus—names that would speak to His purpose: Savior means He will atone for the sins of the people, Christ identifies Him as their deliverer and Messiah. And Lord identifies Him as divine. The shepherds discover they are not outsiders to this gift, but recipients of it!

Imagine it! An angel appears to the most disregarded people in the land to deliver the greatest announcement ever given! Glory of all Glories has appeared to the lowest of lows, and he gives them a sign that would have left them speechless—the Savior—the Christ—can be found where the young lambs are kept. He'll be the one not clothed in wool, but in a swaddling cloth. The shepherds see not only that He has come; they get a hint as to why. When they find Jesus there in a manger, as the angel said, the very location of His birth was drenched in meaning for them. The Savior has been born into their unclean world in the same manner as a lamb. And they of all people know what these lambs are for. So they leave astonished!

Poor so We might be Made Rich:

It is a great mercy to us all that Jesus was born in this way. God didn't let this world domesticate our Messiah. He was born in this world, but was not of it. He was born and lived and died poor. Paul writes, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though He was rich, for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich."^(2 Cor 8:9) Jesus was born poor for our sake. He lived poor for our sake. And He died poor for our sake. Yet as we see this baby lying in the manger in Bethlehem, do you wish He could have been born someplace nicer and cleaner? Are we trying to "domesticate" Jesus?

For many, if we're honest, what we want is to tell Jesus about all the things we value, all the dreams we hold dear, all the plans we've crafted, and then ask Him to get behind them and make them so. If He would do this for us, we think there would be no more darkness to fear. We'd be certain about things. But we ask Jesus to give us a quality of life He Himself rejected... to make others respect us, while "He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him..."^(Jn 1:11) We ask Him to see how a bump in salary could really free us from worldly cares, when He never owned a home. Is the purpose we want Jesus to serve in our lives the same purpose for which He came?

He became poor so that by His poverty we might become rich. Rich in what sense? The angels give the shepherds the answer. Jesus would bring peace with God to those on whom God's favor rests. Peace with God is the reason Jesus came. Is peace with God what you want most? It's what you need most, because there is no one in this world you were made to be closer to, more in love with or more loved by than God. Your sin puts you at war with your Maker. But Jesus came to make peace by paying the wage of sin for you, reconciling you to your God. And from the manger to the cross, He never counted the comforts of this world more precious than you.

Not only is peace with God the best gift Jesus could give, it is exceedingly more glorious than we imagine it to be. We may have a hard time grasping this, but the angels seemed to get it. The text tells us one angel came to announce Jesus' birth, but it was like there were a million more hiding behind some celestial corner, and once they heard, "Unto you is born this day... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!" they all rushed in singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased." They couldn't contain their praise at this news. If we're wise, we'll grant their response fits the announcement, even if it does not move us in quite the same way.

Rather than telling Jesus what we want and asking Him to get behind it, He shows us what we need, and then tells us God is behind that. May that image of the manger, where the sacrificial lambs are kept, be a reminder that Jesus has come into this world in the same way He left it, out among the poor and despised, but singularly driven by His purpose, to ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appears. So Rejoice! Immanuel has come to you, O Israel. Jesus is both the Light of the world who takes away darkness, and the Lamb of God who takes away our sin. May your celebration of Christmas be marked by your worship of Jesus!