

Dec. 24, 2020 -- (Christmas Eve, Birth of Jesus)

Sermon Text – Luke 2:1-20

- The time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn...In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night...The angel said to them, "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...The shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger...When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. -

Nothing about this is normal – no room in the inn...a babe laid in a manger...angels talking to shepherds...shepherds visiting the baby...people amazed at what the shepherds told them. No, nothing about this is normal. One certainly would have expected more. If the Son of God were to be born, it surely would not have been in a shelter for animals. If God's Son were to make his presence known, he definitely would not have chosen a feed trough for a bed. If the good news of the divine birth were to be announced by God's messengers, it undoubtedly would not have been to shepherds out in their fields. If the heavenly child were to receive visitors, they clearly would not have come from among the keepers of the sheep. And if people were to be astounded by what had been told them, the awesome revelation absolutely would have been delivered by individuals considered to be above the level of beggars and thieves. No, this is not the way we think of it. The birth of God's Son warrants so much more than this – a birth in a palace...a golden crib with a silken blanket...heralds sounding the trumpets in the public square...kings and princes coming to pay their respects... and the staggeringly good news proclaimed by sages and seers. No, nothing about this is normal.

But that is precisely what makes it so special. If the birth of the holy child had met all our human expectations, we may never have even noticed. The gospel writer goes to great lengths to point out the unusual circumstances. It happens during a census ordered by the ruler of the Roman Empire for the purpose of enrolling the entire world. It took place far from home because Joseph, the child's earthly step-father, was from the house and line of David. It involved a stable and a manger because Bethlehem, the city of David, was crowded with people returning to their hometown to be counted. It included shepherds, I think, because they were the only

ones awake and paying attention in the middle of the night. It seems the angel's other choice might have been soldiers pulling guard duty in the wee hours of the morning, but we already have representatives of the ruling power mentioned in the story, so why not shepherds? It was, after all, a message intended for more than just a few, specific listeners. It was good news for all the people, from the highest to the lowest, shepherds being about as low as you can go. And it needed a definite sign that could not be missed, a newborn baby, wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger. How many of those could there be in a small town like Bethlehem? Not so many, I'm guessing, maybe just one. So, this birth is different, it's special, it's far more than we ever might have come to expect.

It's hard to know what exactly we are to expect from Christmas these days. As we come to this hour, many of us find ourselves in strange and unfamiliar situations. Though the hope of a safe and effective vaccine has placed a light at the end of our tunnel, we are still largely separated from one another and confined to our own peculiar surroundings. There will be no festive gatherings with family and friends for most of us, no travel to grandma's house or exotic vacation spots in a far off place. Oh, some will risk it, but most will stay put. For now, we need to avoid the virus and protect ourselves from the disease, lest we find ourselves filling a hospital bed in the ICU and struggling to breathe. We've heard the stories. Some of us have experienced them in our own families. And there won't be any assembling the extended family of the church for the glorious spectacle of Christmas Eve worship in the sanctuary, the decorations and candlelight flickering in the semi-darkness, as we sing "Silent Night" and feel all the warm feelings of that precious and holy moment. No, we may wish it and hope that it will return next year, but not now. This Christmas will be different. It will be special. It will be so much more, for it comes to us without the trappings and distractions of the familiar.

But no, nothing about this is normal. That first Christmas wasn't very normal either. I'm sure Mary never had it on her agenda to give birth in a stable or lay her baby in a manger. But it worked, and it led the shepherds to proclaim amazing things about the child that had been born, for they couldn't wait to repeat the words they had heard, sung to them from the mouths of a host of heavenly messengers. And the good news of that birth still echoes in our ears and fills our hearts with much to treasure as we ponder it, because in that child is born to us "a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." As another Lutheran interpreter of Christmas, Theodore Geisel, whom you know as Dr. Seuss, once wrote at the end of his famous story, "How the Grinch Stole Christmas:"

“He hadn’t stopped Christmas from coming. It came. Somehow or other, it came just the same. And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold, in the snow, Stood puzzling and puzzling: ‘How could it be so? It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes or bags.’ And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn’t before! ‘Maybe Christmas,’ he thought, ‘doesn’t come from the store. Maybe Christmas perhaps means a little bit more!”

No, nothing about this is normal. And there is no way to take back all that the worldwide pandemic has taken from us. But it hasn’t taken Christmas because Christmas is just so much, ever so much more!

Amen.