

## **Glory to God in the Highest (Luke 2:14)**

A sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

The manger is empty, and therefore the tomb is empty, and everything is changed.

Some churches today put up a living manger scene shortly before Christmas with real people and real animals. Others are invited to drive by and take in this living manger scene.

We ask ourselves: What was it really like? The stable was probably a one-story building with place for both animals and humans. Above this structure would be an attic-like upper level for storage and guests. It was probably noisy and drafty. It wasn't only that there were cattle and donkeys, but also goats, pigeons, and chickens. It wasn't the kind of neat, clean stable that we think of.

As Christmas lore has developed over the centuries, more has attached itself to the event. Mistletoe goes way back. The Christmas tree is only five hundred years old, but that has become part of Christmas celebrations around the world. Then there's Scrooge from Charles Dickens. Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker. The Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street. The Grinch who stole Christmas. And Santa, Rudolf, and stockings, Frosty the Snowman, and much more. How do you sort it out as to what it's really about?

In the 1960's the world famous, Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, came to the United States because he was interested in the Civil War. After visiting Civil War battlefields in Gettysburg, PA, Barth flew to Chicago to give a lecture at the University of Chicago. (He gave the lecture to help cover the cost of his trip). He spoke in a huge auditorium that seated several thousand people, and there wasn't a vacant seat in the whole place. After his lecture there was a question-and-answer period, and one cocky student stood up and asked: "Professor Barth, you've written thousands and thousands of pages, would you summarize in a few words what it's all about?"

There were gasps in the audience. How brazen! How embarrassing! The proper answer Barth could have given would have been: "Have you read them?" But that's not what Barth did.

He said: "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong; they are weak but he is strong."

And his answer, of course, stunned the audience.

This is what Christmas is about. It's about the whole of Jesus' coming and doing and being. There is a real danger in saying it's the greatest story ever told because this makes it out as if it were a story. One is tempted to say the manger is Act 1, Scene 1 and the Resurrection is Act 5, Scene 5. But then that sounds like it's a drama, a story. No, this is the event that changes and controls all other events that ever happen.

Of course he was born just exactly like us. He was a little baby and then a young boy, then a teenager and a young man, and then a grown up. And he was hungry and thirsty, and tired and slept. And he wept. And he died and he rose again for you and me and the whole world. That totality is the great gift. And it would be a mistake to keep it in the manger because the manger is empty. It is empty because he went on, and therefore the tomb is empty, and therefore everything is changed.

On many Sundays we lift up the Bible verse 2 Cor 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Luther called this, "The Happy Exchange." Christ took our sin and death and gave us his holiness and life forever. The best business deal that ever was.

This is expressed beautifully in the fourth verse of the Christmas hymn, "Let All Together Praise Our God." It may not be familiar to you, but it goes like this:

"He undertakes **a great exchange**  
Puts on our human frame,  
And in return gives us his realm,  
His glory and his name  
His glory and his name."

That's what Christmas is about. "The Great Exchange," "The Happy Exchange" in which the Lord gives us his realm, his glory, and his name!

Another Christmas carol, "Silent Night," is one of the best loved carols, sung in every church by candle light on Christmas Eve. But there is something about that carol, that silent night, that we need to see through.

In 1952 the experimental composer, John Cage, wrote a three-movement piece called "Four Minutes and Thirty-three Seconds." It is played with any number of instruments and no rehearsal is needed because all it is, is **silence** for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. John Cage pointed out that when you do that, you find out there is no real silence; there are the sounds of the place you are in, whether it is the creaking of the building you are in, or if you are outside, the rustle of leaves, or the scurrying of squirrels.

Is that the "silence" we hear when we sing "Silent Night"? NO!

When we sing "Silent Night," it's not the rustle of leaves we hear, but the words of John 14:27: "Peace I give unto you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

This is the great message of Christmas: "Peace I give unto you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you."

In the silence of the night comes the song of the angels: "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that has come to all the people; for **to you is born this day** in the city of David **a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!**" (Luke 2:14)

With that we want to sing also, "Joy to the World!" – the most well-known Christmas carol of all time. We should sing it with drums and trumpets and ringing bells because of its thunderous glory:

"He rules the world with truth and grace,  
and makes the nations prove  
the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love.  
And wonders, wonders of his love."

Because of him, everything is changed. Angels, from realms of glory, come to sing to us, as Martin Luther wrote:

"From heaven above to earth I come  
To bring good news to everyone!  
Glad tidings of great joy I bring  
To all the world, and gladly sing.

O Lord, you have created all!  
How did you come to be so small,  
To sweetly sleep in manger bed  
Where lowing cattle lately fed?"

As "Silent Night" says, Christmas is about his redeeming grace, the third verse:

"Silent Night, holy night! Son of God, love's pure light  
Radiant beam from your holy face,  
With the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord, at your birth,  
Jesus, Lord, at your birth."

That is for you and me as well. We have been made his own in Baptism. By his redeeming grace, we who have died with him shall also live with him. All we can do at Christmas is sing:

"Angels we have heard on high,  
Sweetly singing o'er the plains,  
And the mountains in reply,  
Echoing their joyous strains.  
*Gloria, in excelsis Deo;*  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*"

Glory to God in the Highest! Everything has changed by his coming and living and rising again for you and me. Amen