

CHRISTMAS EVE
DECEMBER 24, 2019

FIRST, MARSHALL
PR. SCOTT FULLER

IS 11:1-9; MIC 5:2-5a; LK 2:1-20
Good Fellowship, Good Food, Good Words

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we believe and in believing we obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.



I have really enjoyed this year's season of Advent. For those of you who are not **church**-nerds like me, Advent is what we call...the time after Thanksgiving...the time that we spend preparing for the celebration of Jesus' birth.

Truth be told – I've always enjoyed Advent...

...which, you may be surprised to hear, actually sets me apart from a lot of other pastors. Truth be told, it can be a challenging time for some clergy members. In my experience, lots of pastors, during the month of December, display lots of frowns, for a number of reasons:

- it's a very busy time...
- some pastors get upset when people want to sing Christmas carols before it's Christmas...
- another group bemoans the commercialization of this holy day...
- and still others worry that as the year comes to a close, the money for the church budget might not be there...

All of these challenges – and more – can make it hard for some pastors to be positive during the days leading up to Christmas... But that's not me.

It's never bothered me to sing Christmas carols during Advent – truth be told, I start listening to Christmas music way before Thanksgiving...

True, I don't love how commercialized Christmas has become – but I sure love seeing the joy that comes from giving and receiving presents.

No, in fact, my joy continues to increase the closer we get to December 24th – to this beautiful and amazing moment, when the final act of God's plan to bless the world and everyone in it, began to unfold in that little town of Bethlehem.

That good news just fills my heart and soul with peace, and really opens my eyes to all the things that I'm thankful for.



For one thing, I'm thankful for the people I work with. I'm surrounded by an incredible staff of talented and dedicated people who not only do their jobs exceedingly well – but enjoy doing their jobs exceedingly well.

Secondly, I'm blessed to serve this amazing congregation! I'm so thankful for being able to do ministry with you great people of our First Lutheran family – I'm humbled by the gifts this family of faith shares – your generosity, your eagerness to serve, your passion for sharing your talents, your willingness to sacrifice, and your pure enjoyment of delighting in simply being the body of Christ.

And finally, barring the obvious painful exceptions to the rule that tragedies can bring, how could we not be filled – this evening – with a sense of wonder and delight, of darkness and light, of a sacred mystery and the gift of spiritual sight...?

Every Christmas celebration I've ever been a part of has been special because of the people who were there, and the conversations that were shared...good people, good words, good news...the same essential ingredients to that very first Christmas Eve celebration.

Here are the details as have been popularly portrayed:

The Emperor in Rome declares a census, for tax purposes, which means that our newlyweds must travel back to their ancestral home of Bethlehem. Mary, many months pregnant, rides on a peaceful donkey led by Joseph. Since the town is filled with travelers, they're shooed away by the Motel 6 manager because there's no room for them at the inn. Out of options because they're poor, they are forced to bed down in a barn. And there, surrounded by animals, Mary, alone with Joseph, gives birth to Jesus...

In fact, the bible is silent about some of these things that we've come to accept as fact. The couple did travel to Bethlehem...but there's no mention of a donkey – or anything about their journey.

In fact, there's no mention of any animals – either on the journey or even in the barn. Sara did some research and discovered that the animals were introduced by St. Francis of Assisi – who is, of course, the patron saint of animals – back in the year 1223.

The couple did bed down in a barn...but nothing is said about an innkeeper turning them away, just that *there was no place for them in the inn.*

Richard Swanson, a professor of Religion/Philosophy/Classics at Augustana College just over in Sioux Falls, has come up with an interesting twist on this last bit of information.

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1880

He asserts that the word for *inn* could also be interpreted as *guest room*, which is exactly how the same word is used later in Luke's Gospel. The place where Jesus eats the last Passover meal with his disciples, just hours before he's crucified, is in the *guest room*. Inn-or-motel here, guest room there.

Swanson offers this as an alternative to consider. Says the theologian,

*Mary and Joseph (and Jesus) are sheltered (in the barn), not because all the motels were full and they were alone and friendless, but because the fact that the **family guest room** was already full... (yet that) does not mean that family members would be turned away.*

Quite the contrary. He continues: In the narrative world opened to us by the (biblical) storyteller, family will always provide shelter and support. That's why Mary and Joseph were not concerned twelve years later when they were returning from their annual Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem: they supposed, for an entire day, that Jesus was in the group of travelers. With family... (That's what family does.) That's also why, at the very end of Luke's story, the daughters of Jerusalem come out to mourn for their brother, Jesus, as Rome leads him out to his execution. That also is what family does.

And on top of all that, look at who's invited to celebrate the birth of this amazing child:

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

"to you is born..." says the angel...which is a very interesting choice of words... Born TO you...is what you'd say to members of the family...

Dr. Swanson continues by saying,

The good news (of the angels) is the news of a birth, and the baby is born to a family. Even the shepherds are part of the family (the clan). Having heard the family news, the shepherds go to welcome the baby and to congratulate the parents. When they arrive, they participate in the family ritual of forecasting the future artistic and intellectual accomplishments of the baby, only they have more to go on than most visitors. (The shepherds) are not limited to noticing that he looks just like Uncle Oscar or has the hands of a pianist. They have the word of an army of angels, singing in the night, so they report that. That is what family does.

And there's one more interesting thing to note in this passage: look at verses 17 and 18.

The shepherds have run in from the hills and found Mary, Jesus and Joseph. Then says the Gospel writer Luke, ¹⁷*When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;* ¹⁸*and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.*

Who are those *all who heard it*??? Maybe it wasn't just Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, all alone against the world...maybe they were surrounded by family, and tucked away all nice and warm in the hay loft of the barn...

In the end, though, it really doesn't matter – these casual details are interesting, but not defining, they're fun to play with but they don't change the meaning of the story. For the meaning of this event is the treasure, is blessing, is the promise that will lead us to life as God's children – beloved by the Lord, claimed by the Lord, protected by the Lord, and cared for by the Lord.

I love what the angel says to the shepherds after calming their fears:
This will be a sign...



... *for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*

For you...

Two little words that actually carry the very fullness of God's gift of love and life and salvation to all people: for you...

I wonder if Jesus thought about these words of the angel when on another night, years later, the night in which he was betrayed, he took bread, and wine, and gave it to his followers, saying, *This is my body, this is my blood, given and shed...FOR YOU for the forgiveness of sins.*

According to Martin Luther, those two little words are some of the most important that we'll ever hear.

This is *for you*...

-is what the angel said to the shepherds on that first Christmas night...

This is *for you*...

-is what we say to beloved people in our lives as we hand them a gift...

This is *for you*...

-is what Jesus said to the disciples, and what he says to us whenever we celebrate his gift of Holy Communion.

Jesus is, as the Gospel writer says, the good news of great joy for all the people.

Day in and day out, the Lord gives himself to you, to me and to all people, **FOR YOU, FOR ME, and FOR ALL PEOPLE.**

Thanks be to God for the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ. Merry Christmas. Amen.