

December 24, 2017  
The Nativity of our Lord (Christmas Eve)  
Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20  
Unto Us a Child Is Born  
The Rev. Dorothy Cottingham  
Christ the King Lutheran Church, Tigard, OR

Have you been following the news? There is so much joy in the British Royal Family these days. The Queen has announced good news. Prince Harry is engaged to be married, an unconventional engagement. Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge are expecting twin daughters in April. The news is all over the internet, people all over the world are talking about this exciting royal news.

Tonight, there is a different sort of “royal” news to share!

Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. Authority rests on his shoulders. He is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority continues to increase. His kingdom will be established with justice and righteousness from this time onward, forevermore! The Zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Exciting news given by the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel. Isaiah was referring to imminent reign of King David the former shepherd boy from Bethlehem. Yet, we who “know the rest of the story” see now that Isaiah was foretelling the birth of Jesus Christ, in Bethlehem, attended by shepherds.

And it came to pass! Mary, the chosen, favored-one of the most-high God gave birth to a baby, in a manger, surrounded by the lowest of the low. No royal announcement to King Herod about the birth of King David’s heir. No invitation to Caesar to meet the new little King. Just an ordinary birth, taking place under extraordinary circumstances.

This birth was and continues to be earth-shaking. God, the Creator chose to come and live among God’s creatures. And God chose an interesting time in human history to appear.

Augustus was Emperor of Rome, Quirinius was governor of Syria and Herod was tetrarch of Judea. At this point in history, the nation of Israel was barely surviving under the latest in a series of foreign occupations, this time by Rome.

Cruelty ruled over God’s people, Israel. God’s people are near-starvation and general hopelessness. Only the corrupt and the politically well-connected enjoy prosperity and health. Joseph and Mary, engaged to be married are doing the best they can with what little they have. As if life were not complicated enough, Mary is pregnant, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Mary’s first reaction to this news was to get out of town. She rushed off to visit her aging relative, Elizabeth. Elizabeth, who is in a bit of an extraordinary situation herself. She, too is pregnant. A pregnancy that was announced by an angel, just like Mary’s was.

There are some weird things going on, here. Rather than freak out . . . and who would blame her if she did . . . Mary praised God:

“My soul magnifies the Lord;” she sings; His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things and  
sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1: 50-53)

Are these words so familiar that we take pass right by them?

Linger over them once more:

"My soul magnifies the Lord," she sings;

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things and

sent the rich away empty.

Mary proclaims that the proud, the powerful and  
the prosperous will tumble from their high places.

The political order will topple;

the currently well-fed will become the future hungry

while those who subsist on the edge of starvation will

find themselves with full tummies.

Mary bold praise reveals that the entrance of the Savior into the world  
is a subversive act on the part of God.

God is initiating a social revolution against unjust rule.

These words fairly shout: "Justice for the masses!"

In another sign of subversion,

the shepherds are the first to hear the birth announcement.

Shepherds who have no power or privilege, only poverty and privation.

They live isolated from family.

They experience societal exclusion,

pronounced unclean by Levitical law,

forever outside the camp.

The angel appears to them to proclaim:

"unto you this day, in the city of David is born a Savior, Christ, the Lord!"

Not just one angel, a multitude of the heavenly host appear, in the night singing

"Glory to God in the Highest!"

When the lowest of the least hear the message, they rejoice.

When Herod, the highest of the most, hears the message, he reacts with fear.

Herod knew that good news for all was not good news for him or his cronies.

This Holy birth spells trouble for the empire. The Incarnation, God taking on flesh in the form of a human infant, is the real story of Christmas.

And it is more than a sweet tableau of a mother and child, safe in a cattle barn. This is God one directly intervening against the political power of the time. This is God announcing:

""My rule is one of justice and mercy, especially for the poor, the powerless and the hungry.

It's not particularly good news for those who oppress the powerless,

keep the poor in even greater poverty, and refuse to feed the hungry."

Every actor in this cosmic drama was changed by this birth.

Mary, Joseph, Herod, the innkeeper, indeed all of creation.

The shepherds returned to their fields changed!

They returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

How will we return to our homes this night?  
How will this good news, this royal news, change our lives?

The grace of God has appeared! How will we respond?

Let us pray,  
Gracious and merciful God, on this day when Advent is ending and  
little more can be done by human preparation,  
we commit to you all our incomplete tasks,  
our unfulfilled hopes and our unprepared hearts.  
Lift them from us and give us in exchange peace and  
serenity to accept the gift of your Word and  
to hear anew tonight the gospel of the birth of your Son,  
Jesus Christ our brother and our savior.

Amen.