

“Let’s Go and See”
December 24, 2023, 6:00 pm Service
Pastor John Mars

Our passage tonight comes from the book of Luke, chapter 2. This morning we looked at part of the birth narrative through the eyes of Joseph. Tonight, we’re looking through the eyes of Mary.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in a manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

May God bless the reading of His Word.

I have to be careful with my opening statement; I have gotten in trouble before. And here it is: Most babies are beautiful. All babies are beautiful in their parents’ eyes. Most people love babies. But the little-bitty, teeny-tiny guys terrify me. Give me a room full of nuclear scientists and doctors and lawyers and engineers, and I’m happy as a clam. One little wormy-squirmy just scares the bejeebers out of me. Everyone wants to see the baby. If there’s a baby in the house, look for the crowd and you will find the baby. And everybody wants to know: Who does he look like? I wonder who Jesus looked like? (Think about that one!) Babies draw a crowd. I have said it at least twice over the last month, and I’ll say it again tonight: I love it when babies cry during my sermon! I said cry, not scream. I love it when babies cry during my sermon because that is the sound of life. It is so much better than a cell phone going off. (Take this time to check yours!)

Tonight, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the greatest gift ever given to humankind. Everything about Jesus, His birth, His life, His death, tells us something about God, and tells us something about how God views us. So, like the shepherds, let's take a trip to Bethlehem and see this kid. Let's find out what He's got to reveal to us about God and about how God sees us.

First of all, one thing I have noted through the years: Oh, how we sanitize this story. This is a gritty story. This is a real story. This is a story of sacrifice, a story of hardship, a story of pain. And oh, how we sanitize the story. I am not a father myself but, believe it or not, I have been a part of several births. They are not silent, sanitary affairs. I had the privilege to do a marriage for a couple from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And I want to tell you, a Congolese wedding is a trip! And I have done a few weddings since I've been here, and those that I have, you'll note that I really will let the couple have almost anything they want, to a point, during the wedding. I'm not that concerned with the wedding; I'm very concerned with the marriage, and so I require a good bit of counseling before the marriage. And this couple, I talked with them, and when you're talking to young people, almost invariably the issue of children comes up. And I said, "Have you ever talked about children?" They said, "Well, yes, we have. We want twelve." It's none of my business. There's a lot of ways to be, in the world, and that's one of them. They wanted twelve. Well, it wasn't about ten months after the wedding, we got a baby. And my wife Jeannine and I go up to see this baby. And this Congolese community, we had 100 to 120 in our church, and they called Jeannine, "Mama Pastor." Even the senior citizens called Jeannine, "Mama Pastor." So, we walk into the room, and she is lying in the bed, and she's got her baby in her arms. And she sees us walk in and a big smile just spreads across her face, and she says, "Pastor, Mama Pastor, one baby. One baby, no more!"

And we forget that these are two teenagers. If they followed Jewish custom, they were 13 to 17 years of age. They were poor. This child was conceived out of wedlock. We know and believe that this child is a product of the Holy Spirit, but how many of their contemporaries do you think believed that? They overcame many, many obstacles. And then toward the end of their pregnancy (nine months along, ladies), the Romans call a census. And that means that Mary is going to have to travel, walk or ride a donkey for eight or nine days, nine months pregnant. They get to Bethlehem and there's no room for them to stay in. I can just hear Mary going, "God, really? I mean really?" They have to stay in a barn with the livestock. Mary has to give birth in this environment. We sanitize it and say Jesus was wrapped in cloths. A proper translation of that Greek word is "rags." And if you don't know, a manger is a feed trough.

This child comes to us as ordinary, unspectacular, vulnerable, helpless, certainly not threatening. Shortly before Christmas one year, I ran into a young couple who had just had a baby. This kid couldn't have been more than a week, maybe two weeks, old. Again, excuse my language, but I call them little wormy-squirmies, because they have no control over their legs or their arms. The only control they have is of their lips. And the parents had dressed this child in a vibrant purple onesie, and across the front, in big white letters, it had: "Eat, sleep, poop, repeat." And I said, "Yes, that is truth in advertising!" And we had a good laugh. And I turned around to leave, and it hit me like a ton of bricks: That's Jesus. That is how Jesus came to us. What does that tell us about God? That is Emmanuel, God with us, King of kings, Lord of lords, Almighty God, Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, wrapped in rags, born in a barn, laid in a feed trough, helpless, vulnerable, non-threatening. What does that tell us about God? If

nothing else, it tells us that God is non-threatening. If nothing else, it tells us that God does not want us to fear Him. If nothing else, we hear God saying in this child, "Do not be afraid of me."

God has gone to great lengths to show us who He is, what He is like, and to have a relationship with us. He has shown us that He loves ordinary people, just ordinary people like you and me. His first visitors were the shepherds. In that society, there were only two reasons you would become a shepherd: either you owned the sheep, or you couldn't do anything else. They were viewed as outcasts. And those were the people God chose to be the first to encounter His Son. What does that tell us? That God is not just for the elite; God is for all of us, every one of us.

All that Jesus was, God is and has always been. Coming in this manner, God is trying to tell us something. At least He is trying to tell us, "Do not be afraid of Me." And when we understand who Jesus tried to communicate that God was, we have some inkling as to how He views you and me. Coming in this manner, He says, "I get you. I understand you. I understand what life is about. I understand the troubles you go through. I understand the hardships you face. I understand. I get you." He is not above us, looking down in disdain, but beside us, looking up in hope. He understands that you are not perfect and loves you anyway (and I'm sorry to break that to you on Christmas, but nevertheless.) He understands that, for some of you, life has not turned out the way you expected, but He loves you and wants you and even likes you, just as you are.

When we understand how God sees us, it drives out fear and dread. When we understand how God sees us, it alleviates embarrassment and we can approach God with confidence. When we understand how God sees us, it brings love and joy and peace and hope: love that is unconditional, joy independent of the circumstances of life, peace that passes all understanding amidst the chaos of our lives, and hope for a brighter and better future. When we understand how God sees us, we know, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that God loves us and wants what's best for us.

So tonight, God is saying, "This is my gift to you. Merry Christmas." In the child Jesus, I want you to hear God saying, "Here, this is for you. Don't be afraid of Me. I love you just like you are. Merry Christmas."

Let us pray.

Lord, you have gone to extraordinary lengths to communicate Your love for us. Tonight, we open our hearts and receive that love. Tonight, we make room for You in our lives, and we accept this great gift that You so freely offer. Now, Lord, touch every one of us as we share Your light with our world and with one another. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.