

Sermon for Christmas Eve 2025

St. John's Tappahannock

Rev. Nanette Woodworth

Luke 2:1-20

In our gospel today Luke takes us back in time to the history and geography of our most cherished Bible Story. Mary and Joseph travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register for the census, and where Jesus is born. Luke connects these events to historical figures of Herod, Caesar Augustus [and Quirinius (governor of Syria)], reminding us that God, Immanuel, came down to us in time, on earth, into history.

Luke then weaves several themes through these traditions including **food, grace, joy, humility, peace, and salvation** to make an exquisite tapestry of meaning. I would like to explore some of these themes with you.

The first theme is that of **food**, something that all people everywhere need to survive. The manger, a simple wooden structure meant for the feeding of animals, is mentioned three times in this passage. In so doing, Luke emphasizes that Jesus himself is sustenance for the world – although Jesus is born in humble circumstances and without what we would consider normal hospitality, Jesus is the one who will be host to the spiritually starving humanity. Later when Jesus is fully grown, and about to lay down his life as a servant, he hosts the Last Supper in an inn, a meal that his disciples will continue in his memory. The one who was received in **humble** circumstances becomes the symbol of hospitality. Certainly, we know that Jesus' ministry was characterized by sharing of meals with those who were considered the outcast, and through the intimacy of breaking bread together, began to restore their brokenness and alienation by inviting them back into community. And

Jesus offered spiritual nourishment and eternal life to all people, in his own time, and through our discipleship over the ages.

This brings us to the themes of **grace and joy**. In today's OT reading from Isaiah 9, we read in verse 6:

“For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

I am sure you are familiar with these lyrics from movement 12 of Handel's Messiah, Part I. Probably, like me, you hear the triumphant music echo behind these lyrics from this triumphant oratorio. Certainly, the reason for great joy is God's grace for all people, in this salvific breaking into human history.

In verses 11 and 12 from today's Psalm 96, the very earth is shouting out with joy to proclaim this good news:

11 Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad;
let the sea thunder and all that is in it; *
let the field be joyful and all that is therein.

12 Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy
before the Lord when he comes, *
when he comes to judge the earth.

I am reminded of when the Pharisees said to Jesus on his triumphant ride into Jerusalem to rebuke the crowd that was so loudly singing his

praises, and Jesus responded, “If they keep quiet, the very stones will shout out!”

It’s as if all of creation is singing: “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” (Luke 19:37-40)

As we ponder the theme of **salvation**, we realize that in the birth of Jesus, God’s salvation is not in some distant future, but is already here. For Luke, salvation means restoration to wholeness, rescue from the sin and the separation it causes from God, others, and ourselves. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, saves us from destructive self-isolation and invites us back to the nurturing of human community. Again, this is reason for great joy.

Turning to the theme of **peace**, Jesus is the Messiah who will bring about the eschatological gift of peace, which the angels say when they proclaim, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (2:14). So when the shepherds follow, saying ‘Let us go see this thing which is come to pass,’ one can only imagine what a serene tableau they witnessed there.

The presence of the simple shepherds echoes back to David, and the Jesse Tree, and Jesus’ lineage. These shepherds respond eagerly to the angelic good news, who go tell others what they have seen. So often in scripture God chooses unlikely persons to proclaim the gospel and to share the joyful news.

Finally, we are reminded that Mary is the model believer because, while at first she does not capture the full significance of these events in Jesus, (and really, how could she possibly understand it all?) she shows that she senses that this is a journey of faith. For after the

annunciation she prophesizes the breaking in of God's kingdom on earth through the birth of his Son.

So like Mary, each year we ponder anew this joyful news, trusting in God's goodness and mercy.

What can we expect as joy-filled people?

We feel joy as we grow each year in our awe and wonder of God's amazing grace in our lives.

We feel joy when after we fall short of being our best selves, we are not rejected, but forgiven and empowered to become children of God.

We grow into the joy of being there for others as well, learning to love as Jesus loves us – unconditionally, so that we all may be restored and returned to our true selves, grounded in the acceptance we offer one another.

We grow into the joy of understanding that we are birthed and rebirthed over a lifetime, letting go of that which no longer is working for us, and realizing we need less and less, and want to give of ourselves more and more.

We find joy in Christian community which is the place where we keep the flame of hope alive among us, and take it seriously, so that we can grow in courage, trusting that there is a spiritual power in us when we are together that is greater than when we are alone. This trust allows us to live in this world without surrendering to the powerful forces that can draw us into despair if we let them.

And we find joy in a rebirth of creativity – in how we relate to one another, in how we go about the sacredness of the everyday things as well as the efforts of longterm projects and plans that discipleship demands.

What a creative life demands is that we take risks. When we make ourselves available for the inflow of the Holy Spirit, we accept not only its generative power but also its ability to overcome whatever stands in the way. This is the time of year to remember that ‘the glory of God is humankind, fully alive’, as church father St. Irenaeus said.

To become fully alive is to allow ourselves to become a vessel for the Holy Spirit to shine through, and allow that work to guide our steps. Once we do, we are assenting to a sacred adventure. We are saying yes to the transcendent and embodied presence of the holy, just as Mary did.

And as we are transformed in our inner lives, we are able to be vessels of change in the outer life. At a time when it is tempting to be cynical and despairing, may we live in hope. In a world of mean-spiritedness, we may in turn offer hope and encouragement to others.

In the words of the late Episcopal priest and author Frederick Buechner, “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the difficulty and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: [live] your way into the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.” **1**

So may the humility of the shepherds, the perseverance of the wise people, the joy of the angels, and the peace of the Christ Child and the holy family, be God’s gift to you this Christmas time and always.

And let’s not forget, may we share this gift of the good news, and each in our own way, *Go Tell it on the Mountain, that Jesus Christ is born!*

Amen

1 Buechner, Frederick; [The Remarkable Ordinary](#); Zondervan Publishers; 2017

