

Advent 2017 – The Joy and Sorrow of Jesus' Birth

"The Expected Surprise"

Text: Isaiah 40:1-5

This evening (and, God willing, during the two remaining midweek Advent services) we will attempt to gain a new appreciation and perspective on the arrival on our earth of Jesus Christ by being carried back in time. We begin the journey this evening as we carry ourselves back through the years, back before the World Wars, before the birth of this country, in fact long before the discovery of the North American Continent by European explorers. Back through the Reformation, the Hundred Year's War, before knights and castles, and before the fall of the great Roman Empire we are transported.

To accomplish this you must first clear a good deal of clutter and debris from your minds: all the history, all the science, all the accumulated knowledge and wisdom. Erase it all from your hearts and thoughts, from your world – all the commotion, the materialism, the technology of over two millennia. Send it all away: the cars, the guns, everything that uses electricity. There is no polyester, no Dacron, no rayon or nylon, no synthetic fibers or materials of any kind. Gone is all music, except what is played live in your presence on an acoustic instrument. Gone are all books, all magazines, all modern toys and dolls and games. Take your minds to a place and time where there are no paved roads for there is as yet no concrete or asphalt. There are no plastic containers, wrappers, or bags. Everything that you have ever seen or used is made of wood, stone, baked clay, animal parts, or some precious metal that is easily refined. This is your world. The year is 3 BC.

You do not, of course, know it as that year. You really have no idea what year it is, nor does it really matter to you. This is just another year in which you struggle to survive in a world full of far more danger than safety, far more uncertainty than surety, and far more apprehension than calm.

And yet this year is special, for this is, as yet unknown to you, *the* year – “The Year of our Lord.” This is the focal point of all history; the epic moment from which all years will be reckoned and all time measured. As you sit now in the darkened stillness of ancient Palestine, hear

these ancient holy words written over 700 years before you were even born. The words come from the Prophet Isaiah, the 40th Chapter:

^{ESV} **Isaiah 40:1-5** *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

These are God's words, spoken through his inspired prophet and preserved for our instruction and growth. Give honor, study, and obedience to these words, for they are surely blessed who hear the Word God and treasure it. Amen.

Look around you, once again, at your world. Note first of all the quiet, the lack of noise and commotion. The wind, the rain, an occasional animal, insect, or human sound is all that you hear. Your land is a semi-barren farming community, a land of cold and heat. It rains very little and sheep and other farm animals greatly outnumber the human inhabitants. Yours is a world where very little ever changes, where the passing of time can just as easily be measured in centuries as in years. Your land has long been dominated and ruled by others, most recently you suffer under the iron hand of Rome. That is really the only thing that seems to change, the names and faces of your conquerors and oppressors. Many years ago it was the Persians, before them the Babylonians, and others before that. Someone else will surely follow. Yours is a defeated people in a bullied land, and that is what dictates and colors your existence.

In short, yours is an existence centered around the basics of life itself. The very thing that lends itself to boredom and tedium is that which connects you to a truer, more basic reality of life. Your world is superbly uncluttered and basic. Your existence is the land and the creatures – men and animals – who live off of that land. You work to survive, and your pleasure and fulfillment must come in the process of that struggle for survival. Yours is also a world as

methodical as the seasons that come and go. You have no preoccupation with cleanliness, for such a thing would be nearly impossible in this world of dirt floors, glassless and screenless windows, and sparse water – every drop of which must be carried to where it is used. Yet yours is a heart for the most part unburdened by deadlines, tickets and bills. The result of this lack of clutter and distraction is that the basics of life are not lost on you. They are, in fact, your world. Your communication must all be face to face – no nameless, faceless impersonal dialogue over copper wires or airwaves. Your interactions are with each other, rather than machines, and your entertainment requires the physical presence and personal contact of other living beings.

This is your world, and as a citizen in this world of struggle and sameness you hear these words written by the Prophet Isaiah seven centuries before you were born: ***“Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”*** For centuries these words have been read, but nothing ever seems to change. For centuries your same poor, beaten down community has heard the same words – so often now that they have lost their meaning. Yet what *did* they once mean? They couldn’t really mean anything in a real, literal, or even practical sense because for *seven hundred years* they have been read and *nothing has ever changed*. It has always been taught that these are words of prophecy concerning the Promised Messiah, the one who would one day come, but that same promise had been given to the very first man and woman, and still the One promised had not come. Nor would he ever come, not to a place like this, not to a place like Bethlehem.

So how, you ask yourself for what seems like the ten thousandth time, is one supposed to prepare according to the words of the Prophet here? How is one who still looks for the coming of that great Savior supposed to ***“prepare the way of the Lord”***? How does one go about ***“making straight in the desert a highway for our God”***? The words tell of the “Coming One,” but they long ago stopped having any real meaning in your life. How can a hundred generations all continue to prepare for what never comes? How can so many continue to get ready for what never happens? And so you hear the words again, but you do not hear them. You contemplate their meaning, but no practical insights present themselves. Your reading, your listening, has become a ritual, and you really have come to know no other way.

Yet in all of this one thing has escaped you, one truth so simple, so plain, so obvious that you never gave it a second thought or a moment’s notice. What you failed to take into consideration is the simple fact that nothing ever happens before it happens. There is a waiting time for every promise – a necessary interim time good only for waiting and preparing. Since God is the one who made this particular promise, then the only thing that is uncertain is *when* the promise will be fulfilled, not *if* the promise will be fulfilled.

Also unknown to you is the fact that the waiting for this the greatest of all promises is about to come to an end. You have entered the great and glorious year of fulfillment – the ***“fullness of time,”*** as the holy writer would later call it. The notion that nothing ever changes in Bethlehem is about to be forever dispelled.

The greatest irony in all of this is that after all that waiting, after all that sameness and endless repetition, you almost missed the great event itself. How? Because even in your normally quiet, uncluttered world you found yourself focused on the noise and commotion of the great Roman Census. The Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, had ordered a census of the entire Roman Empire. The order brought hundreds of relatives into the city (some known, but many unknown). It became a time to renew old acquaintances and celebrate rekindled friendships; and in the process of all of this the mother and stepfather of the Son of God were pushed to the side and forgotten. Day after day you longed for change and excitement, and when it came it served only to mask the *true* excitement – the greatest event in the history of mankind.

Thanks be to God that the event, which came rather suddenly after thousands of years of expectant waiting, did not end or disappear just as suddenly as it had come. Most would have missed it. Instead, this Savior came not just to fulfill the requirements of the Law in our place; he came to make his presence known to the world. So it was that the Child and his parents remained in Bethlehem for many days, and his presence was announced by angels and shepherds, by Magi from the East and by a special, glorious star.

This is the land and the time of Jesus’ birth, and yet we cannot remain there. We visit only to gain perspective and insight. Now we must be carried back through the centuries to return once again to the Year of Our Lord, 2017. We return to the traffic and technology,

to the frantic materialism and the unbridled greed of our day and age. The contrast is truly shocking. While the world we just visited was characterized by sameness and routine, our day is polluted by innumerable distractions and mind-numbing change. The human touch is being exchanged for the isolation and absorption of phones, televisions, internet, and video games. Our connection to the earth and to the basic elements of life has been nearly severed. There is simply no time.

Yet we too wait for the fulfillment of a promise that could come at any moment. Unlike the first promise, however, the fulfillment of this promise will not only *come* suddenly, it will also *end* suddenly. The first time our Lord Jesus came, he came to call, to serve, and to suffer. He came to die for our sins. The next time he will come as lightening, and he will come as the Righteous Judge. Then there will be no time, and then what, dear Christians, will be the cost for lack of saving faith when his second promise is fulfilled? How will anyone be able to look past, beyond, or through the confusion and clutter of our modern society and still maintain a sober vigilance?

That is why we are here this evening, in this place. We gather to be reminded that as our Lord fulfilled his first promise, so he will soon fulfill his last promise. We gather to be reminded how difficult it can be to remain prepared and focused. Those with saving faith in their hearts are ready for this return at any moment, yet Satan struggles mightily to cloud our sobriety and distort our focus. Let him rant and rave, but let him fail. Let God himself preserve us, strong and alert, until his Son returns. Amen.

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Midweek Advent Services – 2017

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn (63)

Liturgy – A Service of the Word (Supplement page 22)

The Scripture Reading for the Day

(November 29) John 7:37-47 On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" ³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. ⁴⁰ ¶ When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." ⁴¹ Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee?" ⁴² Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" ⁴³ So there was a division among the people over him. ⁴⁴ Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. ⁴⁵ ¶ The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" ⁴⁶ The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!" ⁴⁷ The Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived?"

(December 6) 1 Peter 4:12-19 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" ¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

(December 13) John 3:14-21 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ ¶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

The Confession of Faith – (The Christmas Creed)

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Who sent His Son to be my Savior;*

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, my Lord, the long-promised Messiah, Who came as foretold, being conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, announced by the angels, worshipped by the shepherds, adored by the Wise Men, Who lived to suffer, die, and rise again, To free me from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil;

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, Who has brought me to faith in my Savior, And by whose continuous work in my heart, I rejoice in my salvation, Walk in Christ, Show forth His praises, And will one day live and reign with Him in all eternity. Amen.

The Pre-Sermon Hymn (62)

The Sermon Theme – "The Joy and Sorrow of Jesus' Birth"

Nov 29: His arrival is sudden, though expected (*Isaiah 40:1-5*)

Dec. 6: His arrival brings sorrow, which is unexpected (*Matthew 2:13-18*)

Dec. 13: His arrival brings comfort, which is certain (*Jeremiah 31:15-17*)

The Offertory – [Sung by All]

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from Thy presence; and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation; and uphold me with Thy free spirit.
Amen.

The Post Sermon Hymn (68)

The Collect for Peace

Pastor: *The Lord will bless His people.*

Congregation: *The Lord will bless His people with peace.*

Pastor: Lord God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed, give unto Your servants that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be prepared to obey Your commandments, and also that we, being defended by You from the fear of our enemies, may pass our time in peace and quietness. This we ask through the merits of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Savior, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

Congregation: *Amen.*

The Prayers of the Day

The Lord's Prayer

The Benediction *(Spoken by the Pastor)*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Congregation: *(Sung) Amen.*

The Closing Hymn *(647 Stanzas 1 & 4)*

Silent Prayer

Sermon Texts:

^{ESV} **Isaiah 40:1-5** Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

^{ESV} **Matthew 2:13-18** Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son." ¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 31:15-17** Thus says the LORD: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." ¹⁶ Thus says the LORD: "Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. ¹⁷ There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country."

- Please return this bulletin to the Entry Table to be used next week -

Advent 2017



THE JOY AND SORROW OF JESUS' BIRTH

- THE EXPECTED SURPRISE
- THE UNEXPECTED SORROW
- THE CERTAIN COMFORT

St Paul Lutheran Church
Bismarck, ND