

Christmas Eve 2019

"Is It Really Just a Story?"

Text: Luke 2:16-19

In the Name of Jesus Christ, by whom God the Father himself made "a way, in a manger," dear fellow-recipients of God's greatest Gift:

That part of God's Word on which we will base our study this evening is found in the Second Chapter of Luke's Gospel, beginning this evening with the 16th verse:

ESV(Luke 2:16-19) And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

So far the very words of our God. Although countless gifts are exchanged during this season, none can possibly compare to either the gift of the Christ-Child himself, or to the verbally inspired words by which we are told of this gift, and by which saving faith is created and preserved in our hearts. That our God would bless us through the study of his words of truth also this evening, so we pray: **"Sanctify us by Your Truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!" Amen.**

From our children this evening we have again heard the Christmas story. The Children's Christmas Eve service has become our tradition for several reasons, chief of which is the joy of hearing the familiar story not just from their mouths, but also from their hearts. Nothing could ever give a Christian parent more pure and lasting joy than knowing that their little ones are also Jesus' little lambs – that they too are heirs of heaven through faith in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit has created and sustained this saving faith in their hearts, therefore to him alone we give all glory, thanks, and praise.

Yet in the midst of anything so adorably sweet and endearing, we would be wise to recognize also both the risk and the potential problem. In fact the very theme of their presentation this evening identified the great challenge we need to identify, confront and overcome: *Stories – True or False.*

The word "story" itself should be neutral, but it almost never is. In other words, the word itself really says nothing about true or false. We supply the *expectation* of true or false. Are children, for example, expecting always

and only *truth* when they ask for a bedtime *story*, or are they more expecting to be entertained? Is Grampa a great storyteller because every story is true, with no nonsense or make-believe? What percentage of movies are "based on a true story," and how does that change the way you watch?

You get the problem. When we refer to it as "the Christmas *story*," we are immediately taking a risk that those who hear will, even unconsciously, listen skeptically – as though what comes next is really just another fairytale. Nor is the risk restricted to children. In fact if anything the problem is magnified in the minds of adults – those who have a more refined sense of what is typically true and what is not. Nor are Christians immune.

If asked, every true Christian will confirm the truth of the "story," which just means that the devil's plan is much more subtle and therefore much more dangerous than we might first imagine. It's way too easy for Christians to never really consider the *reality* of the events that form the basis of their Christmas celebration. In other words, we seldom stop to consider the *reality* of the Incarnation of the Son of God. We don't stop to consider that fact that a real, live woman gave birth to God, and that that Child had no human father. We don't tend to consider that there were real, living, breathing shepherds who actually saw the nighttime sky lit up by the glory of heaven, and heard a host of angels proclaim the birth and the glory of God.

And yet how can Christmas ever mean what it should mean to us if we never take the time to contemplate the *reality* of all of the various aspects of the story? How can we gain and continue to hold in our hearts the awe and wonder of this "once and for all, world changing event" if it remains for us "just a story"?

The solution, of course, is to dive headfirst into the inerrant Word of God, and to do so with an absolute "Thy Word is truth!" attitude. One thing that we find is that the challenge we face here is actually nothing new. The temptation to think only superficially about God's truths has been a problem for Christians of every age – including also those who arguably should have known better. Do you recall when Jesus, following his resurrection from the dead, joined those two disconsolate disciples on their walk to Emmaus? They were so dejected by what they believed to be Jesus' failure that they actually ridiculed the "Stranger" for what they regarded as incomprehensible ignorance: **"Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"** ^{ESV(Luke 24:18)} Listen carefully to the exchange that followed: **Jesus said to them,**

"What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. ²² Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." Theirs was an all-too-familiar problem, wasn't it? They hadn't seen the angels, so the testimony of those who had become just "a story." Others had seen the tomb empty, just as Jesus himself *had told them it would be*, but they too were just "telling stories." They obviously didn't place any credibility in the eyewitness accounts, or they wouldn't have been to downcast and dejected.

Jesus' reprimand must have cut them to the heart, and his words should have the same effect on everyone today who hears any part of his Word superficially, or with any degree of skepticism: ***And (Jesus) said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!"***

John the Baptist can also help us here. Listen carefully to what he said to his disciples when they complained that his disciples were leaving to follow Jesus – that Jesus was therefore growing more popular while John's popularity was declining:

^{ESV} **(John 3:30-36)** *(John said to his disciples) "He (Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease. ³¹"He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. ³³ Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. ³⁴ For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."*

John's message to his disciples (and therefore also to each of us): *Why would you possibly expect anything else? These are not games that we are playing. This is ultimate live or death truth!"* The only explanation for the displeasure of John's disciples was that they harbored a superficial,

unserious attitude toward that in which they were involved. It's as if they were playing a game, and therefore unhappy that "their team" seemed to be losing. Note then with what serious, lofty words John communicated to them not just the importance, but the *reality* of who and what Jesus represented – the very real, divine, historic Messiah, the One who, in his person, represented the only hope for the entire human race. Hear again these sobering words: ***"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."***

It is with this understanding, this sobriety, this "Thy Word is truth" attitude that he hear again the absolutely factual account communicated to us in the words of our text: ***And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.***

This is how we rightly first prepare our hearts, and then rightly celebrate the altogether true, and truly awesome event we know as Christmas. Eternal God became man. The Baby the shepherds found lying in a manger was not a myth or a cute story. He was and is the eternal Son of God. What they saw was a human being *in whom resided all the fullness of God. (Colossians 1:19)*. Think thus of Christmas, and you will be fully prepared to celebrate it. Amen.

Hymn - 707 "On Christmas Night All Christians Sing"

The Prayers

The Benediction

Hymn – 646 *(Red Hymnal)*

"Silent Night"

- Announcements -

Welcome – A warm welcome to all, especially to any guests with us this evening. We consider it a great privilege to share God's Word with you—especially the gospel message of the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior – as retold also this evening by our children. Please record your visit in our guest book and join us again, including our Christmas Day Service tomorrow morning at 10 am.

Christmas Gift Bags – As is our custom, gift bags have again been prepared for the children in attendance this evening. Please feel free to take a bag with you for each of your children as you leave the church this evening.



**St Paul Lutheran Church
Bismarck, ND**

Christmas Eve 2019



ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Angela Pfennig, Organist

Michael Roehl, Pastor

Gary Miller, Lay Instructor

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2019

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

Hymn 712 - "What Child Is This?" (Brown Hymnal)

Service of the Word (Brown Hymnal page 22)

The Scripture Reading: John 1:1-14 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The Confession of Faith - (The Christmas Creed)

***I believe in God the Father Almighty, Who created me
And 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 Spirit, 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.*

Hymn 702 (Stanzas 1-4) (Brown Hymnal)
"As Angels Joyed with One Accord"

Christmas Stories – True or False

The Story of the Christmas Tree
(Recitation by our children)

Hymn – 713 (Children Sing Stanza 1, Congregation 2-4)

The Story of Candy Canes
(Recitation by our children)

Hymn – 706 (Children Sing Stanza 1, Congregation 2)

The Story of "Away In a Manger"
(Recitation by our children)

Away In a Manger (Sung by the Children)

The Story of Martin Luther and His Lute
(Recitations by our children)

Hymn – 85 (Children Sing Stanza 1, Congregation 2-3, 5, 13-15)

Sermon by the Pastor

"Is It Really Just a Story?"



Text: Luke 2:16-19

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¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. (Lk. 2:16-19 ESV)