

St Paul Lutheran Church Christmas Eve – 2018

Dear Fellow Recipients of the greatest gift ever given – Jesus Christ our Savior:

Our text on this eve of the celebration of our Savior's birth is a part of that familiar Christmas account that you just heard from our children, found in the Second Chapter of Luke's Gospel, verses 16-19:

And (the shepherds) 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.

This is the Word of God. Thank him ceaselessly for the gift of his words, by which we are brought to faith and preserved in the same. To prepare our hearts for the study of God's Word, we pray, "***Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth.***" Amen.

It's a word that we find often in our Christmas hymns – "wonder." We sing of the "*Child of wonder*," of a "*Great and Mighty Wonder*," of the "*wonders of his love*" and how "*we are rich for he was poor, is not this a wonder.*" There are many such references in our hymns, for good reason. The original source is probably our text for this evening and the "wonder" that filled the people of Bethlehem at the news the shepherds brought them.

There is, in fact, no greater *wonder* in the history of the human race than the eternal God entering our world and taking into his divine essence the humanity that he himself once created. We look on the event again this evening with profound wonder.

Or do we? Do we still look with wonder?

Wonder is that unique human characteristic that causes us to investigate the unknown. The wonder begins in childhood. Give a little boy a toy and you will likely soon find it disassembled, because he wonders how it works. And probably not only disassembled but abandoned. Wonder causes us to look, to investigate, to explore, to question, and yet answers are often the death-knell of wonder. Explanation terminates exploration. Answers tend to render the mysterious ordinary and therefore forgettable.

The problem or challenge then in connection with the birth of the Son of God ought to be readily apparent. We cannot, *dare not*, allow the wonder of the birth of our Savior to be lost to us. It is too sublime, too important, too monumental to be disassembled, studied, partially understood, and then discarded, neglected, or forgotten. This incredible, miraculous event quite literally forever changed the course of human existence. More personally, it was the miraculous beginning of God's rescue plan for humanity.

This evening we have been reminded of the explanation of one of the traditional Lutheran forms of Advent worship – the Advent wreath. Many of you may have wondered for some time about the meaning behind what began as a uniquely Lutheran form of worship – a meaning or understanding that has been all but lost to modern churches.

As I'm sure you are aware, we are continually faced with a decision regarding the manmade customs and traditions of the past. We must understand them, or we must discard them. To preserve customs in ignorance invariably results in formalism – the focus on outward forms of worship to the exclusion of the internal meaning and understanding. Nothing good ever comes of formalism.

As we have now been reminded, the Advent wreath was born during a simpler time, a time when there were fewer distractions and when Christians employed more common, everyday teaching tools like candles and light, but when Christians nonetheless needed to be reminded of the wonder of the birth of our Savior. The Prophecy, Preparation, Shepherd, and Angel candles of the Advent wreath were intended to remind us of the hope, peace, joy, and love that the birth of our Savior represents.

The final candle in most Advent wreaths is the Christ candle. The candle obviously resides in the center, reminding us that Christ is always the center, the focus, the heart of our entire existence. The light from the candle is to remind us that Christ himself was the light that at Christmas entered our sin-darkened world, without which we would have groped and searched in vain for a way out of the black dungeon of our own sins.

Having then "disassembled" and studied this Lutheran tradition, what do we do with it? It is not an easy question and there is no simple, one-size-fits-all answer. Our curiosity has been satisfied, for we have our explanation, but where now do we go from here? On the one hand, we never want to lose the *wonder* of the birth of our Savior, but are

teaching tools like the Advent wreath the only way – or even the best way – to preserve that wonder, that ongoing amazement and understanding?

Such decisions were left by God to the Christian judgment of local congregations. What we never want to consider optional, and what we therefore must make every effort to preserve and maintain, is our wonder at the event itself – the birth of our Savior. Yet as G.K Chesterton once astutely observed, the older one gets, the more it takes to fill the heart with wonder—and only *God* is big enough for that.

So it is that God in our text referred to two very different paths that our natural human wonder can take, one path taken by those who heard the announcement of the birth from the shepherds, and the other the path that Mary took. History tells us that the two are very different. The people were intensely interested in the events described to them by the shepherds, but history tells us that for the vast majority their wonder was short-lived. After perhaps a year and a half, Jesus and his family fled to Egypt, and from there to Nazareth. At some point the initial wonder of those who first heard the message of the shepherds waned. Maybe they later came to see the "newborn King," but probably saw nothing all that unusual or special. Even the effect of the star, which led the Magi (or Wisemen) from East seems to have been a passing phenomenon that was eventually discarded. Given Bethlehem's proximity to Jerusalem, it's even possible that some who were present at Jesus' birth were also present at his death.

Not so with Mary, who, according to our text, ***"treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart."*** That's the sort of ongoing wonder that you and I want – not the sort that loses interest the moment a bit of understanding is gained (or what we imagine to be understanding). We want the sort of wonder that continues to fill us with that childlike amazement at the miraculous birth of the Son of God – who came to save unworthy sinners like us.

If you need help with that, maybe you could try what apparently helped President Theodore Roosevelt. Whenever President Roosevelt felt that he was getting a bit too full of himself, that he was feeling a bit too self-important and losing perspective, he is reported to have had an interesting antidote or ritual that would put it all back into proper perspective. Whenever he felt he needed to be reminded, he would step outside at dark, look into the night sky, find the faint spot of light at the lower left-hand corner of Pegasus, and recite: *"That is the Spiral Galaxy of Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It is seven hundred and fifty thousand light years away. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our own sun."* There would be a

pause, after which Roosevelt would grin and say, "Now I think I feel small enough! Now I can go to bed."

Try that, if you ever start to lose the proper sense of wonder at the birth of the Son of God. Look then upon that incredible scene and see just who occupied that little cattle trough – the very One who, by the power of his word alone, created the universe that is infinitely vast beyond our comprehension. *That's* the Savior who came to rescue us. *That's* the Savior who came to rescue *me*.

God grant us this sort of wonder, now and always. Amen.



St Paul Lutheran Church
Bismarck, ND

Christmas Eve 2018

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Christmas Eve – December 24, 2018

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

Hymn 647 - "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (Red 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 62 (Red Hymnal)

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

The Christmas Story as told through the Advent Wreath

The Prophecy Candle Explained (Hope)

(Recitation by our children)

Hymn – 95 (Children Sing Stanza 1, Congregation 2-3)

The Preparation Candle Explained (Peace)

(Recitation by our children)

Hymn – 63 (Children Sing Stanza 1, Congregation 2-3 & 5)

The Shepherd Candle Explained (Joy)

(Recitation by our children)

Hymn – 715 (Children Sing Stanza 1, Congregation 2-4)

The Angel Candle Explained (Love)

(Recitations by our children)

Hymn – 707 (Children Sing Stanza 1, Congregation 2-3)

Sermon by the Pastor

"The Christ Candle"



Text: Luke 2:16-19

¹⁶ And (the shepherds) 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. (Lk. 2:16-19 ESV)

Hymn by the Children "Away in a Manger"

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 for 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.

