

The Nativity of Christ – December 25, 2016
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Isaiah 9:2-7 (NIV)

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. 3) You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. 4) For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. 5) Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. 6) For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7) Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

HEAVEN IN THE MANGER

Fellow observers of the birth of Christ;

In Johnson County, Texas, a young boy in a Sunday School class was asked to name the place where Jesus was born. Blurting out all the ancient cities he knew, he guessed Athens, then Carthage. When he was told that the right answer was Palestine, he said, "I knew it was in East Texas somewhere." Perhaps the boy was not far from wrong.

In fact, the Child born once in Bethlehem of Judea is not far from our congregation either. He is closer to Sheboygan County than we might think. Jesus is not merely "away in a manger," but He is "here in our Church." As we have seen throughout Advent, the Church becomes the cradle in which the Lord Jesus humbly dwells with his presence. Christ, who is so little that He could be nestled at the breast of His mother, Mary, invites us to receive Him in His littleness on the lap of our mother the Church. Heaven is come down to the manger. And Christ's manger is here.

Birth announcements are often amazingly simple. The phone will ring in the parsonage and the proud Father will simply say, "My wife just had a baby!" I often have to ask whether it was a boy or a girl! I'm not sure if it's nerves or excitement that causes the simplicity. Isaiah echoes that simplicity, **For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.**

Mary had a baby. Heaven came down into the darkness. As simple as it is to say that a child is born, we must recognize who this particular Child is. This is God from God, as the Nicene Creed says. He is no ordinary child. Isaiah calls him, **"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."**

He is the one who brings light into a world darkened by sin and death. **The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.** A great light has been seen. The Christ Child brings light where once there was only darkness. Those who walk in darkness walk in pain and suffering as they trip over obstacles and run into walls. People in darkness walk in ignorance of the path before them. Light changes things allowing us to avoid the obstacles and walls and the pain that comes from tripping and banging into things. Christ, the great Light also changes things. Christ is not merely a great luminary, but He is the very source of light. He provides light where there is nothing shining.

While visiting Siberia in the summer, the tourist was shocked to find the sun piercing his sleep at four in the morning. Like a laser beam, the sun cut into his fifth-story, east-facing, curtain-less room. That first day, he had no choice but to rise in respect to the new light that erupted in the Siberian summer sky.

When the true Light was born under the darkened sky, the stars were overwhelmed by the arrival of the true Light that “enlightens everyone” (John 1:9). Christ, the Light of the world, overcame the darkness and brought true joy. Because the Light came and abolished the darkness, joy has been poured out on the people who walked in the darkness.

In the birth of this Child, the ancient oppression has been broken. The victory of the Child is swift, shocking, and complete, just as in the day of Midian where Gideon’s three hundred stunned the Midianites with a crushing defeat. Here the weakness of the few defeats the power of the many as “the LORD [gave] the host of Midian into your hand” (Judges 7:15). This same “weakness” clothes the Child born of Mary, but Jesus is strong to save His people from their sin.

The Son is given, but He is not merely handed over. He is given to us! In older editions of Martin Luther’s commentary on this passage, printers often placed the words “to us” or “for us” in capital letters. They wanted to emphasize as boldly as they could that the work of Christ to save the world was not some abstract theological concept or philosophical idea. Christ was given not just generally, but TO US. How strange that the God who made us and who possesses us gave Himself to us, to sinners! God acts for us by giving Himself to us.

We receive divine Wisdom through this Child. We receive this wisdom as we receive Him through the Word and Sacraments. The Word has been given to us, and in that giving the Word Incarnate gives Himself to us. Thus the baby born of the virgin in Bethlehem is ever reborn among us through the Word. The speaking of God in His Word conveys what it says. His speech does not merely tell us about Christ. It does not merely relate the lovely story of a child born in humble circumstances so we may be delighted or filled with nostalgia. No, the Lord gives the story and speech and makes present to us what it says. God’s Word is ever a creating Word, unlike human words or speech. We become overwhelmingly sure of God’s presence here because He speaks His presence among us (Matthew 28:20); this is such wonderful fulfillment

of the divine purpose to be a God for us. The sacramental action of this night's Eucharist is for us. From the "manger" of our altar, the Child serves us with His own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

Mary's Child bears our nature, so we might bear His immortality. The Son given to Mary is God. Her Son is the Father's Son. The God-man dwells among us, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Even the ancient witness of Isaiah is decisive about who the Messiah will be. By flesh He would be the son of David, but He also would be the Son of God.

Like a father is to his children, so God in Christ is compassionate to those whom He has made and redeemed.. He is zealous for His children (Psalm 103:13). And His zeal brings God in Christ to live with us here as we draw near the cradle of His Word. The Prince of Peace comes from the house of David (2 Samuel 7:12ff.) and will occupy an eternal throne. Through Him peace is granted to those who know their sin. To them God says that because they are justified by faith in Christ, they have peace with Him (Romans 5:1). This peace is not wishful thinking or faint hope, as it is among humans. This peace is a reality that our Prince defines in His own person. Jesus is peace; therefore we have peace (John 14:27; 16:33).

At Christmas the world heard God call, "Come closer." In the table set here, Christ calls, "Come closer." The Word invites us to the manger of the Church where Christ is laid. Be near us, Lord Jesus! Amen.