

Christmas Eve 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 24, 2017

Luke 2:1-20

Hodie Christus natus est. Christ is born today.

Alleluia! Christ is born today.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Dear Friends:

About half of my sermons begin by reminding this congregation that there are four biographers of Jesus. Whom we call Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Four individuals with four points of view.

In terms of Christmas– in terms of the birth of Jesus– Mark has no interest whatsoever in the baby Jesus. Mark begins his tale of Jesus– his gospel– when Jesus is a grown man. John– the guy that we will read from by candlelight at the close of tonight’s service– John only cares about the spiritual meaning of the birth of Jesus. John does not name the mother of Jesus, or tell us any concrete details about Bethlehem and mangers and angels. John only tells us the spiritual meaning: that the light shines in the darkness, and that the Word became flesh.

Only two of the four writers– Matthew and Luke– tell the details of the birth of Jesus, and they don’t agree about all of the details, nor about what is most important.

And I point this out– this diversity of perspectives– because this night is devoted to Luke’s point of view. A billion Christians around the world are in church tonight, reading the gospel story that I just read with you. In fact, if you watch “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” Linus reads Luke’s version of Christmas. Luke has become the default explainer of Christmas. But I want you to know that within the household of faith, within the Christian community, there are different takes on what this is all about. Ranging from Mark, who doesn’t think that the birth of Jesus is worth mentioning. To John, who thinks that it’s an event with cosmic consequences so important that the details are just plain awkward, perhaps embarrassing.

And YOU, therefore, YOU might be a Christmas person. Like Linus, in “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” you might be able to recite Luke’s Christmas gospel from memory. But you might NOT be a Christmas person. You might be like the gospel writer Mark, who couldn’t care less about the birth of Jesus. And yet Mark is literally sainted, a writer of the Bible. Or you might be like the spiritual gospel writer John, who regards the interior meaning of Christmas much more highly than all of the paraphernalia that lie on the surface. If the household of faith– the Christian religion– can accommodate Matthew, Mark, Luke, AND John, then there is room here

for you.

What do you put on top of your Christmas tree? Maybe someone else decides for you. But if YOU were to put up a tree yourself, and decorate it yourself, would you put a star on the top of the tree? Or would you put an angel on the top of the tree? Either one is okay. The angel is more Luke. The star is more Matthew. Like I said, the household of faith is much wider than you might have believed. Angel or star? You'll find both in the Bible.

Here are five famous people who put the angel on top of their tree: Princess Diana. George Frederick Handel. Walt Whitman. Oscar Hammerstein. Mother Teresa. And here are five famous people who put the star on top of their tree: Isaac Newton. Thomas Jefferson. Ralph Waldo Emerson. Frank Lloyd Wright. Neil Armstrong.

Okay, I made all of that up. Heck, Walt Whitman and Isaac Newton may not have even *had* Christmas trees. But the choice of the angel versus the star reflects that there are different ideas about the true meaning of Christmas, the true message of Christmas.

Tonight is decidedly an angel night. When you stand in this pulpit on Christmas Eve, you stand between the opening of Luke's gospel— Christmas. And the opening of the Acts of the Apostles. Words over the preacher's head. From the Ascension story in Acts, also by Luke. And at the beginning of Luke and at the beginning of Acts— on Christmas and on Ascension, there are two common connections. Mary— the mother of Jesus— is in both stories. And there are angels in both stories.

So the same man wrote both books, both stories. In the first book, the story of Christmas, Jesus appears on earth, in a manger, and the angels appear in the sky. In the second book, the story of Ascension, Jesus goes into the sky, and the angels appear standing on the ground. As I printed in your service folder: *While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.* Christmas and Ascension. Angels in the sky, then angels on the earth. Is that a coincidence? I don't think so.

In both cases, the angels are saying, "Pay attention. Something important is now taking place." Angel is a Greek word that means messenger. It doesn't mean protector, it doesn't mean Cupid, it doesn't mean wings. It means messenger. And the message is: Pay attention. Something important is now taking place. In the Christmas story: *"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."* That's the message.

What the shepherds actually see is funky and weird and unusual. A newborn, not lying in a bed or a cradle. But in a trough for animals. Weird, to be sure. Possibly sad, and worthy of pity. But that's not the message of the angel. The angel says this is big stuff. Not just news; GOOD news. Not just joy; GREAT joy. Not just for some people; ALL the people. And you would probably believe an angel, especially one accompanied by a host— an army— of singing angels.

The other thing about the Christmas angels in the sky and the Ascension angels standing on the earth is that in both moments the portal is open. God is normally in heaven, where things are good. And humankind is normally on earth, where things vary (at best). On Christmas, the drawbridge is down, the highway is open, between heaven and earth. Because God comes down to be with us. And at Ascension, the drawbridge is down, the highway is open, between heaven and earth. Because Jesus is going to rule at God's right hand.

What that means for you and for me is the possibility that heaven and earth can coexist, can overlap. And in our very lives— the very life we have this night, the very life that stands before us in the new year— in our actual lived lives, regardless of whether we are young or old, regardless of whether we are content with life, or discontent, regardless of whether there is an angel on your Christmas tree, or a star— regardless— in our *very* own lives, starting right now, there is the possibility that heavenly things can happen.

That's what it means when an angel appears in the night sky near Bethlehem. That heaven and earth are not as far away from each other as it seems. And in that message is hope. Perhaps even great joy. For another day, for another year. For the living of our lives. For the advancement of peace and good will on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.