

Christmas 1

Luke 2:8-20

My dear friends, my true brothers and sisters, in the name of our true brother and truest friend Jesus Christ. I want to tell you a story. I'm in it, and you're in it too. It takes place a long time ago, in a lonely little grass field halfway around the world. The sun has already gone down, but you and I, we're all still out working in that field. The cool Mediterranean air nips at your nose and freezes your fingers, your breath comes out in clouds of vapor. The dew-tipped grass tickles your toes through your worn-out sandals, as do the leathery noses of your sheep grazing around you. It's already late, and you feel a yawn coming on, your eyelids grow heavy. No sound but the soft bleating of your sheep. No light but the stars in the sky and the faint glow of little Bethlehem in the distance.

And then suddenly, you're blinded by an incredibly bright light from above. Your sheep scatter, but you just stand there frozen, we all do, not knowing what on earth to do. If you squint, you can just barely make out a vast number of living beings in the sky giving off this light, and the rushing sound of their voices is unmistakable: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth death to men on whom his judgment rests."

Is this the message you were expecting? You and I both know this is Christmas night, a Savior has been born to us. But this? This is the message of death and despair, and a manger that is altogether, entirely empty.

Now let me tell you another story. I'm in it, and you're in it too.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 2:8-20)

Which story is more familiar? Death or peace? An empty manger or the newborn God-child? Which story makes sense? To be perfectly honest, the first story makes all the sense in the world; it's exactly what we deserve: instead of peace, only death, instead of Jesus, only an empty manger. So why should Jesus have come?

In the words of the beautiful Christmas hymn, where those shepherds lately knelt on that Christmas night is also where we see ourselves. We come to the manger with those shepherds in half belief, a pilgrim, a wanderer, a doubter, a sinner, our heart strangely stirred.

As the hymn words continue, how should we not have known Isaiah himself would be right there with us! He prophesied about this baby's glorious birth, how God himself became one of us: Immanuel, the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, a child, a son, the Prince

of peace for me. But he also foretold the final result, the end goal of Jesus' birth, because this newborn baby is also for us our suffering Savior. "He would be pierced for our transgressions; he would be crushed for our iniquities." He was born to die. From the moment he entered this world, we killed him. Amidst all the heavenly praise and human amazement and wonder, this little child was marked out for death — I made sure of that... Born for all? Even me? How can he be born for someone like me? Why would he want to? How can he love something that is utterly unlovable? Because that's exactly what I am.

I am so broken, Lord. Broken by my sin, broken by my own expectations, utterly broken by your impossible law, so that I am completely without excuse and can only logically say: Don't come down to earth, Lord Jesus; I am not worth it. Sin plagues me day in, day out, and you know every bit of it. You know even the secret sins I harbor hidden in my heart, how I take this evil to you in prayer but don't leave it there, how I tearfully and emotionally promise to hurl that sin far from my heart with your help, how comforted and assured I feel in that promise, and then how quickly I latch back onto that sin, clinging to the evil that I have always been, my words of prayer ringing as empty as that manger should have been. No, don't come, Lord Jesus. Don't come down as a child for the likes of me simply to be abused by me, to be shamed by me, to be humiliated by me, to be killed by me. Don't come down as a Savior full of love for unlovable me, because I will throw it back in your face every time. No, don't come, Lord Jesus. I am altogether, entirely not worth it.

But he didn't stay put, did he? In that unlikely place, I find him just as they said, just as prophets, angels, and shepherds proudly proclaimed: God with us, a human child, a still, small voice to cry out one day for me, "It is finished." No, I cannot, I will not forget how Love was born, how almighty God loved me so much that he humbled himself for me, how the Creator of all took on the nature of one of his own creatures for me, how the Author of history wrote himself into his own story for me, and how he willingly withstood the most humiliating, shameful circumstances human life had to offer, even an innocent death on the cross. Yes, to be sure, he was born to die—that was the full extent of his love for me, that was how he burned his love into my heart, unasked, unforced, unearned. But more than that, he was born to live. Love lives and will live forever! And because of that, **SO WILL YOU!**

Now let me tell you one more story. I'm in it, and you're in it too. You're sitting in these church pews, listening to a Seminary student preach what may be the only message he gets to share with you, and you're considering two vastly different stories: death or peace, an empty manger or the newborn God-child. By God's grace, you know and trust the beautiful truth of the second story. Like Mary, you're pondering and treasuring this gospel truth in silence and wonder: How, contrary to what anyone could have expected, in spite of everything that we are, Jesus came, the Christ-child, to die, to live, and not for me alone. Like the shepherds, you're equipped to spread this life-giving message to the lost sheep you encounter all around you: a message of sin, yes, but more than that, a message of grace; the true message of the angels: not death and despair to deserving humanity, but life and peace, God's favor and goodwill to all.

Death could reign no longer that night, because Jesus' birth was wrapped up so inextricably with his perfect life, his willing death, and his victorious resurrection for us. Dear friends, take it to heart, brothers and sisters, believe it: Jesus' birth means death's death. And now there IS room and welcome there in heaven for you, for me. Amen.