

The First Sunday of Christmas
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Saturday, December 29, 2007
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 63:7–9; Matthew 2:13–23

Good evening and Merry Christmas. I trust you all have been experiencing an enjoyable Christmas week. I know that mine was eventful... beginning on Christmas Eve. This year I had the honor and privilege of conducting the Family Christmas Eve Service – some of you might have attended that service as well. While I had been properly advised, maybe even warned, that this service was particularly chaotic, I'm not sure I was fully prepared for 100-plus children in the chancel as I delivered the homily. It was a Christmas Eve Service that I'll remember for many years to come.

Christmas is one of those nostalgic times of the year in which we all get in our minds pictures of the perfect Christmas celebration. What kind of images come to your mind? Maybe you think of young children dressed in first century costumes (sometimes made of sheets) enacting the parts of Mary and Joseph kneeling next to the manger filled with hay, the stand-in baby Jesus wrapped in cloths being cradled by Mary and shepherds who come to worship the new born king. Maybe something in a treasured Christmas carol stirs up a particularly fond image, something like: Silent nights when shepherds are watching their flocks by night as angels sing in a heavenly chorus announcing the birth of the King in a quiet little town called Bethlehem. Maybe you think of the many Christmas celebrations past, surrounded by family gathered from far and wide, many who have traveled over the river and through the woods to get to Grandma's house.

Whatever the image, my guess is that each can be characterized by some of these words: calm, quiet, holy, peaceful, joyful, happy, or gentle. Those are the images that I like to have dancing in my head at Christmas. And many of those particular images did dance in my head this past Christmas Eve as celebrated with those gathered at the service and then hurriedly left Camp Hill and headed for North Carolina – a seven-hour ride in the night. As I was driving, I thought about the gospel lessons that the children had read during the service, and the one that I would be reading tonight, and thought to myself – boy how just a few days can change the mood of our Christmas celebration.

Tonight, we don't hear words of calm and quiet, no words of joyous angels singing and bringing glad tidings. No, tonight, we are quickly transported from the serenity of the stable, at least the serenity that the stable is typically portrayed, and right back into the ugly reality of the human condition. Tonight we hear words of betrayal, of trickery, of fleeing for life itself. Tonight, instead of joyous news of the Christ-child's birth, the angels bring warnings that are intended to save the life of God incarnate in the infant Jesus Christ.

Do you ever wonder why Matthew included this story of the early life of Jesus in his gospel account? Do you ever wonder why, out of all the chapters and verses of Matthew's gospel, the revised common lectionary included this reading in the lectionary cycle and why, once the decision to include it at all was made, it was appointed for the first worship service in the Christmas season? I did, especially as I was driving down the dark, nearly desolate Interstate 81 on my way back to North Carolina.

And as I wondered and I wandered down I-81, I began thinking about the story of Joseph's dreams, of the flight to Egypt, the massacre of infants, and Jesus' ultimate return to Nazareth, set against the traditional Nativity story, and many thoughts crossed my mind. First of all, God's breaking into the world in Jesus must have been pretty radical – radical to the point of being threatening to those who were in power and control at the time of Jesus' birth. To think that a ruler, as mighty as Herod, would be so threatened by the birth of this one particular Jewish baby, that he would have all the baby boys under the age of two killed to make sure he got the right one, tells us of the unsettling nature of God's incarnation. Then I wondered how God's activity in our lives today can be equally as threatening.

“This must be why Matthew included this story in his gospel,” I thought. Matthew is, through recording these words, telling all of humanity that God's plan, God's action in Jesus Christ, is something that is not of this world. God's action here breaks all the rules of structured society – that might makes right, that power is found in the strongest, that those in power set all the rules -- and reforms those rules into something that threatens the prevailing social order and redefines it. God's plan for us can also be threatening – as we welcome strangers into our midst, as we reach out to the homeless, the destitute and the addicted, as we answer God's call to live out our life in Christ in this time and place. That's what God's plan does.

My second thought, that dark Christmas Eve night, was around what God's plan doesn't do. As much as we might like God's plan to do for us – to alleviate pain and suffering from our human existence, to ensure monetary success for believers, to create a world that lives in peace despite our differences – it doesn't. In fact, as Matthew tells us of Jesus' exile to Egypt, and of his subsequent return to Nazareth, Matthew is able to show us that God knows all too well our suffering, knows too well what it feels like to be unwanted, knows what it feels like to flee for your very life in the cover of darkness. God knows what it means to be persecuted. In order for Matthew's Jesus, Emmanuel – God with us, to know our suffering, God must experience that suffering. And as God shares in our affliction, God begins the work of our salvation through Jesus Christ. God does not outsource salvation. God ensures salvation through God's own active work.

As these thoughts were running through my mind this past Christmas Eve night, and I was making my way down Interstate 81, I suddenly realized that I was traveling along the highway in an uncharacteristic state of aloneness. I had anticipated that traffic might be light, but nothing like I was experiencing. Ahead of me, there was nothing but darkness – no tail lights from other cars carrying other Christmas travelers towards their destination. Behind me, way in the distance, I could see a couple of pairs of headlights of approaching vehicles. But near me, there was nothing but darkness.

Then, suddenly in the distance I did see light piercing the darkness. It grew brighter as I drove closer. As I approached exit 296 in Strasburg, Virginia, I finally saw the source of that particular light. There on the side of the mountain, were three crosses, brightly illuminated by powerful lights. And in the light showering these three crosses, this Christmas Eve took on a special meaning. When God became human that night so many years ago, God's actions in saving humanity began, with God full well knowing that the end of the story, the next step in God's plan for redeeming humanity, would take place not in the quiet remembrance of Jesus' birth, but in the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ some years later.

And as the angels announced the news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds, brought warning to Joseph of the plot to kill the baby Jesus, they also delivered to all of us the real message of God's unfailing love for God's created, and fallen, humanity. Tonight we receive again tangible gifts of God's steadfast love for us in Jesus Christ – in God's word and our meal of wine and bread. God's very real presence in these gifts nourishes us for our own journey in this life – a journey that can be filled with threats, with suffering and, yes, with calm, joyful Christmas peace as well.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.