

The Wonder of This Day

The Nativity of Our Lord – Christmas Eve
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, December 20, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

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

They'd never seen cotton candy before, much less eaten it. Wisps of spun sugar encircling a cardboard tube...the warm, sweet smell...sticky goodness over face and hands. And they were eating it while at a circus with a big top tent and animals and acrobats and everything! It was **all wonderful!** It was a day unlike any of the days they usually experienced in the slums of Nicaragua.

Herb Haigh tells of the Christmas he spent in Nicaragua, one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere. He participated in Pro-Nica, a Quaker-sponsored charity that works with the poorest in Nicaragua, particularly orphaned children. The plan that Christmas was to drive a busload of kids to a nice place for party food, a piñata, and a real swimming pool. That was the plan, anyway. For a whole host of reasons, the plan fell through. Of course, these children were used to disappointment. Their days were spent eking out an existence, searching for scraps of food in garbage piles. Their days blended, one into the other, as they tried to survive. A Christmas party would have been nice, but they learned not to expect much.

Herb decided since the original plans fell through, a new plan was needed. He told the bus driver to take his busload to the circus. Now these children had never been to a circus. A big top tent? Why, it was huge, and there were all those people around them! Of course, Herb did have some trouble reining the kids in—oh, they weren't bad, mind you, but they kept jumping up, going to the open flap of the big top, and then rushing back to their seats again. They couldn't believe they had their own seats legitimately! They hadn't stolen any admission tickets. No one had distracted the doorkeeper so the others could sneak in. These seats were their seats, and no one would throw them out. This day was **wonderful!**

They asked Herb questions, some being harder to answer than others: How do you make cotton candy? When you flush the toilet, where does the stuff go? What is a concession stand? Why are people clapping their hands? And all the while, one little girl kept looking around, repeating to herself, "Big top, big top!" Through their eyes Herb saw things that he had long since ceased to appreciate. Now he realized how **wonderful** those things really were. Even for Herb, this day was a day unlike any other day.

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered..." So begins perhaps the most familiar of stories about Jesus—the events surrounding his birth.

"In those days..."

These few words sum up what the world was like 2000 years ago—"in those days." Meaning those regular, every-day days. You get the feeling from Luke

“those days” are most ordinary—just the same old, same old. Those days aren't particularly special or impressive. They're marked by the drudgery of life—you know, working hard for food on the table, paying taxes, putting one foot in front of the other, dealing with little and large challenges. Except for those who were powerful and wealthy, like Emperor Augustus or Governor Quirinius, each day pretty much blended into another. But, frankly, the people in those days were used to being disappointed, and had learned not to expect much.

And then, says Luke, came **“this day.”** It would be a day unlike any other. For on **“this day”** heaven's reality broke into a weary world, holy angels sang with joy, and poor, hard-working shepherds were startled with the good news of the birth of a savior. (A telling term here, by the way—the title “savior” was normally reserved for the Emperor.) This day was no ordinary day, for the angels sang to those shepherds how the child's birth was God's way of bringing to earth a wondrous peace and goodness it had not known in a long, long time. This day was no ordinary day, and even if the child they hurried to glimpse **looked** ordinary (perhaps prompting a momentary disappointment because the angels **had** raised their expectations after all), what Luke tells us is the shepherds still stood in awe to glimpse the newborn child, and Joseph hovered over him, and Mary treasured all that had happened and pondered it in her heart. **This day was wonderful.**

The shepherds returned to the Judean hillside and their sheep. It was a workday, after all. But Luke says they returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. They carried the wonder of this day, this night, the stars, the music, that baby, their savior—carried all of it with them in their near-bursting hearts. We never hear about them again, but I hope that what happened, what they had heard and seen **“this day”** made all the difference for the remainder of their days.

When the circus ended and the bus returned the children to their slum homes, Herb's heart was near-bursting, too—full of gratitude to God for this Christmas Day spent with those children. **This day had been wonderful.** Herb wasn't certain what the future would hold, but he prayed the children would know they were loved by God—that God would somehow bring peace and goodness to them, even in the slums. He prayed that **this day**, Christmas Day, would make some small difference for their other days.

Can that be our prayer as well? That the wonder of **this day** would have a lasting impact on all our other days? (You know **those other days**—those same old, same old days where we work hard for food on the table, pay our taxes, put one foot in front of the other, face both little and large challenges, and question whether our expectations are too high.) Can we pray that **this day**, so wonder-filled with the loving presence of God, might change the way we live **those other days**? Like the shepherds leaving the stable to return to their hillside and their sheep, we leave this place tonight. But perhaps also like them, we carry all of it with us in our near-bursting hearts—the wonder and joy of this day... this night... the lights... the music... that baby... **our savior. AMEN.**

Copyright © 2009, Nancy R. Easton. All rights reserved.