

“A Promise Fulfilled: A Gift Given”

Salado UMC—24 December 2017

Christmas Eve

4:00 and 6:00 pm—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 2:1-14

“Never promise more than you can perform”

—Publius Syrus (~100 BC).

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Call to Worship:

10 Say among the nations, “The Lord is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity.” 11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; 1 2 let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy 13 before the Lord; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth (Psalms 96:10-13).

Please, hear the evening’s lesson:

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors”

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to

us.” 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them (Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]).

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ,
Thou Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace,
be born again into our world.
Wherever there is war in this world,
wherever there is pain,
wherever there is loneliness,
wherever there is no hope,
come, thou long-expected one,
with healing in thy wings.

Holy Child,
whom the shepherds and the kings and the dumb beasts adored,
be born again.
Wherever there is boredom,
wherever there is fear of failure,
wherever there is temptation too strong to resist,
wherever there is bitterness of heart,
come, thou blessed one,
with healing in thy wings.

Savior, be born in each of us who raises his face to thy face,
not knowing fully who he is or who thou art,
knowing only that thy love is beyond his knowing
and that no other has the power to make him whole.
Come, Lord Jesus, to each who longs for thee even though he has forgotten thy name. Come quickly. Amen (A prayer of Frederick Buechner: from *The Hungering Dark*).

Luke offers quite a list of characters in his Christmas story (see: Luke 2:1-20). Cited are persons who are important enough to make the guest list: Emperor Augustus, Quirinius, governor of Syria, Joseph, Mary, the Christ child, shepherds, an angel, and a multitude of the heavenly host. If we add in the Magi, who Matthew names, then we have quite an assembly of humans and divine creatures—all part of Jesus’ birth pageantry.

For reasons that that we all understand in our hearts as well as reasons we confess to be far beyond us, we know that Jesus knows how to draw a crowd. Many of us are here this evening because we could not imagine being anyplace else on Christmas Eve. In a moment we will sing one of the church's most beloved hymns, Silent Night. This hymn a congregation sang in 1818 for a service much like this one. Joseph Mohr fashioned the words and Franz Gruber composed the music—on the same day that he first heard the words. The little congregation in Oberndorf sung Silent Night as a guitar accompanied because the church organ was broken. When a random group of Christian people gathers and sing this song, there is an air of peace and hope that permeates the air. The spirit of Jesus has a way of doing this.

In 1989 I was serving a church in a community in which many outsiders from other parts of the country had moved to work in such corporations like Fischer Controls, IBM, Dell, Texas Instruments, and Motorola. Job responsibilities dictated that many of these families could not go home to Minnesota or Pennsylvania or Ohio or New York for Christmas. They were stuck, so to speak, in Williamson County for a time generally reserved for family celebrations in their places of origin. Also, several nearby universities had many foreign students who could not go home for Christmas.

A church member, Dr. Martha Allen, got the idea of having a giant Christmas feast on Christmas day for all those who were exiled in Texas and far from home. Our family opened our presents early that Christmas morning as we had young children. Because there was a lull at the parsonage, I ventured down to the church around noon to retrieve a book. When I arrived, I discovered that the parking lot was full of cars and the fellowship hall was teeming with action. People were in the kitchen getting ready a large feast of “covered dish” dishes and scores of children were running and playing in the gym.

What I saw that morning in my church was like a snapshot of the Kingdom of God. There were seemingly people from every nation, race, age, and tongue there to share the wonder of Christmas with those that they had never met before. There were Spanish-speaking people, Africans, Asians, and Europeans thrown together with a bunch of old-fashioned Americans—and they were having the time of their lives. Despite the fact that they were not with their own blood families on this family day, they had created their own version of a new family. The spirit of Jesus has a way of doing this.

When Martha saw me gawking at the assembly of people, most of whom I had never seen before, she shouted, “Oh good. Here's the preacher. Let's say grace.”

As I prayed I couldn't help thinking about that crew that God assembled at Jesus' birth—astrologers from the East, shepherds, angles, two bewildered parents, and an onlooker or two. The spirit of Jesus has a way of doing this.

The miracle of Christmas is that from many people, God has created one people. Despite our economic, political, ethnic, or language differences, God has called us out to be one people. If there was ever a day or time for us to sing, “Silent night, holy night, All is calm, all is bright,” then tonight is the time. The spirit of Jesus has a way of doing this.

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