

Eve of the Nativity – Year A – December 24, 2010
Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14
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It is truly a sign of our times that bookstores are crammed with self-help books, and there are frequent advertisements for motivational speakers who can help us to lose weight, stop smoking, gain financial freedom, become a better Christian, and make all kinds of positive changes in our lives. According to at least one website, “Motivational speakers not only deliver speeches to inspire people and drive them towards a successful life, but also help them develop effective ideas in order to experience personal growth and development.” Quite a tall order! When we think about it, motivation comes in many forms. Any one of us would be highly motivated to protect ourselves, if we find ourselves in a situation where we’re under threat of pain. The anticipation of pleasure is also a great motivator, as is a paycheck. Then there are more altruistic motives, the desire to help others, and to share our many gifts and resources in Christ’s name. When I was in business, we were all required to complete Total Quality Management or TQM training. Sometimes I actually think I’ve lived the Dilbert cartoons, right down to sharing my cubicle with a co-worker! As the company realigned itself in light of TQM, each employee’s personal improvement plans were driven by corporate goals, which in turn were aligned with the corporate vision. The whole company was motivated to be customer-oriented, always asking, as if we were the customers, “What’s in it for me?” I don’t think much has changed in the world of business. As for the motto “what’s in for me” that, unfortunately, has become more synonymous with the kind of selfishness and individualism that seems to be rampant in the world today, rather than with loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Tonight we do experience one major change, from a spiritual perspective. We transition from our Advent meditations, to our celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. We move from self-examination, to gratefully receiving the incarnate Word in our hearts, and in our lives. The church, that is you, me, all the people of God, are living signs of continued faith in God’s grace. We embody and share the hope and promise brought into the world through the birth of this humble and vulnerable child in the little town of Bethlehem. The Gospel story tells us that the honor of being the first to hear about the Good News of Jesus Christ is reserved for a bunch of shepherds. These days we would probably think of shepherds as hard working farmers, but at the time of Jesus’ birth shepherds were one of the lowliest class of people on the social ladder. By all accounts, this group would be uneducated, unwashed, and undesirable. God is indeed making a statement in this first angelic announcement of Jesus’ birth, by honoring and lifting up the lowliest among us. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus will also fulfill this prophetic promise in His mission and ministry to the world.

Meanwhile back in the fields, the angel says to the shepherds, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day ... a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Martin Luther saw this direct personal address as a hallmark of divine proclamation. The angel doesn’t just say that there’s good news, but says, “**to you** is born this day.” According to Luther, “What good would it do me, if [Jesus] were born a thousand times ... if I should not hear that there was *something in it for me* and that it should be my own?” In this respect, Martin Luther was way ahead of his day and age, and at the same time, he was honest about who we all are in our humanity and all that that encompasses. Created in God’s image, we have brains that help us to think things through, work out solutions to problems, and, of course, consider the pros and cons in our decision-making. In other words, we can’t help thinking about what’s in it for us.

Tonight, as we consider our own place in God’s world, as children of God, as beloved of our nearest and dearest, as parents, grandparents, and so on, let’s consider what the birth of Jesus really means for us today. Perhaps at this time of year, more than any other time, we really want to experience the joy and peace, the goodwill and harmony of the Christmas promise. Perhaps at this time of year, what many of us really experience is a profound sense of loss and grief for those who are no longer with us. On the other hand, many

of us walked into church tonight carrying a huge burden of stress because of financial worries: debts, underemployment, or overspending, and the challenge of higher winter bills. Then there are always the familiar tensions that bubble to the surface whenever we have family gatherings. Some of us may also be worrying about family members serving in the military in distant lands. The world still seems to be full of war and strife from the national level, to the community, and even in our homes, despite God's promise of peace.

Luke's reading confirms that Jesus was born into a world that was also full of hardships, fear, and military oppression. The so-called *Pax Romana*, or peace of Rome, came at a very high price, especially for those who did not want to be conquered by the mighty Roman army. The political forces of the day are busy trying to number and name the whole world for tax purposes – gosh things haven't changed much have they? Yet in the midst of earthly concerns, be they political or economic, God comes in the miracle of an innocent baby, born to an unmarried teenage, in less than ideal circumstances in a strange town far away from her family. God breaks through in all the messiness and uncertainties of human life. God doesn't come at the head of an army like the Emperor Augustus with his lofty claims to the titles of savior of the world, lord, and the bringer of peace. Yet, no less than the angels of heaven praise God and proclaim the infant Jesus as the real savior of the world, the Messiah or anointed one of God, and *the* Lord. There's a strong irony in that the true harbinger of God's peace is not dining in a palace somewhere, robed in luxury, but the One who is God's peace personified, and the bread of life is sleeping in a lowly food trough, wrapped in bands of cloth.

The blessings of Christmas – the 'what's in it for me', if you like – are really about the fulfillment of God's word in Scripture, through God's Word made flesh. These blessings are found in the prophetic traditions of forgiveness and reconciliation, peace on earth, and making our relationships right with God and with one another. The Good News of Jesus Christ *is* more powerful than pain or loss, or any of the pressures that weigh heavily in our hearts this night. The real king of peace is here. The angel says, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." What is being expressed in these words is the divine motivation, God's will to save His children. Peace on earth will only be realized through God's gracious gift, Jesus Christ, given to us through by God's good pleasure. *We are* God's beloved children, and in God's eyes, our faithfulness through lives given in service to the Lord is the greatest sign of real success.

Jesus is born again this night. Will we welcome Him into the cradle of our hearts, or try to find a way to help or save ourselves? The humbling truth of the incarnation, written in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, is that we cannot save ourselves. Only our Lord Jesus offers healing and reconciliation. The best positive change we can ever make in our lives is to receive Jesus Christ, who gives the hope and promise of eternal life, who blesses us with the gift of salvation, through the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus dwells with us, reminding us all to work for justice and equality, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus is with us as a sign of God's love and faithfulness, and of God's abundant grace. In the best of times and the worst of times, let our love for the Lord Jesus drive us to put our trust in Him.

And now, may the peace that passes all understanding – the peace that only God can give – fill our hearts this night and all our days. May God's perfect gift in Jesus, our Lord, stir our hearts to offer thanks, praise, and worship to God in all circumstances. May God's steadfast love and faithfulness inspire us to the share the Good News of Jesus Christ in our words and deeds. May the light of Christ born anew in our hearts, become a lamp of love in this dark and fearful world.

Amen.