

Gospel lesson

Let us hear once again the traditional Christmas story from Luke.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/jesus-birth/>

Luke 2:1-20

(NRSV)

¹ 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.

¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The word of God for the people of God

<Hymn “Angels We Have Heard on High”

UMH #238>

<Angels portrayal>



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/shepherds-angels/>;
credit: LUMO

Will you look at that!

He really did it!

I did not know how it could be done – only God could do it!

Why do you think He did?

Well, you know how much He loves those creatures, always trying to get their attention, making covenants which He knows they will break.

It would be ridiculous that He lets them choose to make mistakes, except that He want them able to

truly love Him too - and we all know that forced love is not really love, but slavery.

Awww, look, they wrapped Him up all snug in those swaddling cloths.

His mother looks so happy - and so tired.

His daddy looks amazed at the miracle in their midst.

Yes, he takes such care with both of them, a good choice to protect and provide for them while the child grows.

Wait, what about the rest of them?

The rest of who?

Humanity! Why aren't they celebrating? God just entered their world to be one of them, so that they could relate to Him, so that He could save them from their sin!

Oh...Why aren't they celebrating, praising God, or reacting in any way at all?

Exactly my question!

Maybe they just do not realize it?

He was subtle about it.

What do you mean, subtle? He sent Gabriel to tell about the prophet John, an angel to tell His mother, and an angel to tell his daddy. That's three angels!

Hmmm...the people they told did not tell many others about God coming among them.

Do you think we should tell them?

Somebody should take note and celebrate! This is HUGE for humanity - nothing else in creation was loved or honored like this!

Who should we tell, then?

We cannot just go into town and tell folks; everyone is terrified whenever we show up!

We do not want Mary and Joseph turned out of the stable on account of that fear - especially since they have nowhere else to go.

Hey, look over there, on the hills nearby - shepherds!

Shepherds? The ones watching sheep?

Yes! The animals will not be frightened by us like humans are, and the shepherds will have to stay to listen, to protect the sheep. We can tell them, and they can go into the village to tell the rest of the people!

Great idea! But...maybe just one of us should be the spokes-angel, so that they hear the message clearly.

<Indicating next angel> Why don't you talk to them, and the rest of us will back you up?

Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

<Everyone in unison> Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!

Whoops, do you think the chorus was a bit much?

No, I think it helped them realize this event is BIG.

Why are they just talking among themselves instead of getting a move on?

They look confused.

How can they be confused? It was a very clear message!

Oh, they're going now.

The news should spread rapidly from here.

I hope so. It would be awful if they missed their chance to know our awesome Creator on a personal level!

Do you think they can handle that? Meeting God?

Well if anything can, they should be able to; after all, they were created in God's image.

Besides, Jesus is one of them; surely they will listen to Him!

<Sarcastically> Yeah, because the one thing humans are known for is getting along with one another.

<Brief pause, looking at one another>

Dear Lord, I hope this works out!

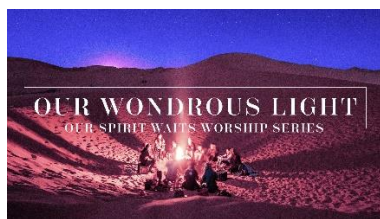
Do not worry, we know God will work it out.

Yes, but what will Jesus have to go through in the meantime?

That worry can be left for another day. Today, let us just celebrate the amazing gift God has given humanity, the miracle of this newborn baby.

<Everyone in unison> Hosanna in the highest!

Message: Our Wondrous Light



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/our-spirit-waits/fourth-sunday-of-advent-christmas-eve-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/fourth-sunday-of-advent-christmas-eve-year-b-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Wondrous Light of the world,
as we take time now to further consider today's scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That our lives, our community, and the whole world may be joyfully illuminated with the beloved gift of You. Amen.

We come now to “Our Wondrous Light” in the Advent series “Our Spirit Waits.”

“It’s Christmas Eve, and we need to make room for the light. It wants to take over our whole life, our lives as the community of faith, the body of Christ. Our problem, this Christmas Eve, is that we’ve gotten too used to the darkness.”



picture from MMMS Collection

At Christmastime, we like to decorate our side porch railings with colored lights that we leave on constantly for the entire Christmas season, including through the night. They are festive and really brighten up our driveway. They even brighten up the upstairs of our house, as we can see them from our upstairs hallway windows.

One night when I woke up from sleep to answer nature’s call, I stumbled sluggishly through the hallway and caught a glimpse of the lights from the corner of my barely opened eyes: the lights were white! I did a doubletake and looked again with my

eyes open wider; as my eyes adjusted, the bright white changed to colored lights.

The phenomenon startled me to be more awake that night than I had been; on returning to my bedroom, a glance out the window confirmed the lights were different colors. I have experienced the same phenomenon multiple times since then, so immersed in darkness while sleeping that I see white lights on the way to the bathroom, but after having my eyes exposed to more light as I go about my business, I see colored lights on the way back to bed.

I think we experience a similar phenomenon when we look at the blessings God gives us. We are so immersed in the sinful world, that gifts of love are too overwhelming for us to see clearly for the more unique beauty they actually are.

The Northern Israelites had been overrun and the Southern kingdom of Judah was in danger from Syria; with their kings unfaithful to God and failing them, the people struggled to see that God was still there, caring for God's Chosen people.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/ten-minute-ot-2/>

So when Isaiah foretold of a child to drive away oppressors and rule from the throne of David, they

took it to mean a military leader for an earthly kingdom. They could not see the beauty of having loving, non-violent **God** as their king because they were so accustomed to the darkness of the sinful, violent world in which they lived. All they could see was a powerful king to come.

So God gave us - humanity - time for our spiritual eyes to adjust a bit. Jesus came as an infant, through the miracle of birth, that the world could grow accustomed to the presence of God on earth.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/gnpi-007-birth-jesus/>

Mary was closest to it, and even she - though willing to serve God - did not really understand what God was doing, though she treasured and pondered all those things in her heart.

The shepherds were essentially asleep to the occasion, until the angels woke them up from their obliviousness. Startled into paying attention, they opened their hearts to see what Jesus was - and they realized enough to tell others and to glorify and praise God for it.

Hindsight is 20/20, or so the saying goes. The apostle Paul in writing to Titus understood much more than Mary or the shepherds did at Jesus' birth. Paul

heard directly from the risen Lord, was physically blind for three days, yet had the eyes of his heart opened to see the beauty of our Savior, God in our human history, and what it meant for us. He became the most ardent proclaimer of the Good News to the Gentile world through his ministry and his letters.

So how is your heart vision tonight? Are the eyes of your soul so clouded by worldly things that you miss the beauty of Jesus' birth as we celebrate it tonight? Are they open enough to see acts of kindness as good things, but too overwhelmed to accept the glory of God for what it is in our daily lives?

Or are you allowing your heart to be opened, that you can accept the incredible beauty of the love of God flooding our world with blessings, driving out sin where we let it, and making us aware of possibilities we might never have imagined otherwise?

Are you letting the eyes of your soul adjust to the wondrous Light of the world, God among us, that the darkness of sin gets put behind us as we cherish **and become part of** the glorious spectrum of blessings God shines upon this world?

Let Christmas be a wake up call for you to open your eyes and notice Jesus! Check out the good things in life that the Holy Spirit has blessed and is blessing you with - and then tell everyone how **awesome** God is!

<Special Music “O Holy Night”

>

<Pastoral Prayer>

Let us pray:

God of Light, we confess that we have gone astray and have left Your light.

We follow the dim lights of the world of success and fortune.

We follow the dim lights that call us to be more religious by following rules.

We follow the fading light of personal salvation.

Forgive us for not seeking the true Light of Your love for all the world.

Forgive us for not following the ways of Jesus, who commanded us to love one another.

Call us to be light-bearers of love, compassion, and justice, in which the Mystery of Your Love is revealed.

In the name of Jesus the Messiah, we pray

(above prayer from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org>)

Discipleship Ministries, June 2023.