

Sunday after Christ-mas December 27, 2009 Luke 2:15-20

Are you tired of the "Three T's" of Christmas – toys, tinsel, and turkey? Tired- that's how many people feel today. But how would we feel if we traveled the road to Bethlehem with the shepherds at the first Christmas?

The shepherds were guarding their flocks on the open field outside Bethlehem as the darkness had lazily settled in. Suddenly an angel of God appeared. Have you ever wondered what you would do if an angel suddenly appeared to you? Why I believe even my hair would stand on end! But the angel reassured, "Don't be afraid. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord!" Then the sky exploded in heavenly light and beauty as the chorus of angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Then just like that they vanished! I wonder what the shepherd's faces looked like! Awe, wonder, excitement pulsed through their hearts. "Let's go see Him!" They hurried down the road to Bethlehem as fast as they could. What did they find when they arrived? They found Mary, and Joseph, and the Babe, lying in a manger. Does that sound like it was worth the rush? Remember who the baby was. "Unto you is born a Savior, Christ, the Lord." They knew the prophecies – a righteous branch from Jesse's root; the everlasting King from David's line; the Child foretold by Isaiah who's name is the mighty God; the suffering servant Isaiah prophesied as the One wounded for their transgressions and crushed for their iniquities. No wonder they hastened down the road to Bethlehem! It was the road to God.

Whom did you go to see as you hurried down the road to Bethlehem this year? In case you forgot, the Lord invited us to **His** birthday celebration called Christ-mas to celebrate that God's Son was born a human child. No, He's not a political Savior, nor a Savior for every earthly disease or financial woe. You can expect to still face a lot of heartache and disappointment in this life, perhaps even more than others since you carry your cross following the One who carried His cross. And why did He come to carry His cross? He's the Savior from sin, and that's what we need! God justly ought to have banned us from His gracious presence forever due to our failure and inability to return His love perfectly, our violations of God's holy will, our sin, and our guilt. But God's Son became man because he still loves us. By His perfect life and death for our sins He has completely put God's anger at our sin to rest. God now forgives us and welcomes us as His children now and forever.

"Nice try, pastor," you might be thinking. "You want us to visualize going to Bethlehem to see Christ, but to believe I actually want to see Him do a miracle or answer all my questions about God and heaven. Only then will I truly believe!" Do you want a stronger faith? In his letter to the Romans Paul gives a very clear answer to where faith comes from: "**Faith comes from hearing the message; and the message is heard through the Word of Christ**" Just as God spoke the world into being in Genesis, just as Jesus called the dead Lazarus from the tomb, so God's Word raises us from spiritual death to life so we trust in Jesus as our Savior from sin and are committed to love and serve Him in faith.

So let's admit it. Don't we come to church on the Sunday after Christmas as a people in need of greater faith? And just as faith in the true God is not something we just naturally have or can create by ourselves, it is also not something we get once and for all and then can forget about. We can get tired of trying to live as faithful people. Calls from the world for our loyalty and commitment to its sinful pleasures may seem more attractive than the call to be disciples of Jesus. The skeptics ridicule our faith, and we may even have our own doubts about all this being true. All the cares and concerns of life which don't really go away but rush back into our lives after Christmas threaten to push faith and Christmas peace out of the way.

Don't you wish you could keep the Christmas faith, peace, and joy in your heart? Perhaps the best way is to stop thinking "I've heard this all before" and try to hear the Christmas gospel as though for the very first time. Are you facing illness? "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior." Are you worried? "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior." Is your family going through hard times? "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior." Are you afraid of life's challenges, or an uncertain future, at least a little afraid of dying? "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior!" Maybe it will be the words of the sermon, or as Jesus offers himself to you in the Lord's Supper; or maybe it will be words of a hymn or carol that make you catch your breath as you think, "So *that's* what Christ's birth means!" "Faith comes from hearing the message," so keep on listening.

Can you imagine the shepherds blankly looking at one another after the angel had left, and shrugging, "I suppose we really *ought* to go to Bethlehem sometime; check the calendar – will next week work?" No – they left their flocks and hurried to see the Christ-Child! And He was really there! Friends, everything we celebrate at Christmas is real. The shepherds saw a real angel. The angel announced the real news of the Savior. They knelt before the real God in real flesh! Jesus really died for your sins and rose again. Jesus really keeps His promise, "Whoever believes has eternal life!" Jesus really comes into our hearts by the gospel, and that is why we go to Bethlehem every Sunday and holy day. That is why we're thankful to support and expand our gospel work. Nothing is more important than our Savior, than the eternal life He has given us, and than the faith He nourishes as He comes to us through His gospel!

But after every thrilling experience, comes a let down. Were the shepherds let down as they returned to their fields and flocks? "**When they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.**" You can't keep quiet about good news! You score the game-winning basket! Your child got all A's. Your mother-in-law really liked the pecan pie you made for Christmas! You pull a trophy walleye through the ice! You wouldn't keep quiet. When the shepherds saw Christ, they couldn't keep quiet! They couldn't help but tell everyone they met.

Then they returned to their sheep - the same old smelly sheep, the same old crumbly job. Or was it? **They returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.** They had seen the Savior, the Desire of nations, the fulfillment of all God's promises. They lived a new life, a life of faith and joy, dedicated to glorifying and praising God!

How will you travel the road back from Bethlehem this year? Martin Luther once wrote, "**This is now the mark by which we all shall certainly know whether the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ is effective in us – if we take upon ourselves the need of our neighbor.**" What is your neighbor's greatest need? Think of the countless numbers of lost souls who didn't know Christmas was Christ-mas, the birth of the Savior. How many are wondering today, "Is there more to the holiday joy than a big dinner on December 25th, heading out for one more bash on New Year's Eve, and then stumbling into 2010?" Do you know anyone, anyone at all who is trying to find the deeper, lasting joy only Christ can bring? Then follow the shepherds back from Bethlehem and spread the good news that Jesus came to give us eternal life.

Someone has said, "If only you could bottle up the Christmas spirit and open a new bottle once a month!" Can we have Christmas joy throughout the year? Yes, but not by bottling it up. We can have Christmas joy throughout the year when like the shepherds we return from Bethlehem to live a new life. Every day thank the Lord for everything you have heard and seen of Jesus again this Christ-mas! Sing out to God's glory in worship all year long! Praise Him in your life as you joyfully follow God's will, and are never ashamed to let everyone know you live to glorify Christ our Savior and King. Remember whom you saw on your journey to Bethlehem! Then your journey back will be a journey to a new life! Amen.