



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“The Difference Christmas Makes”

Scripture Lessons: *Isaiah 52:7-10: Luke 2:1-20*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on
Sunday, December 25, 2022 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in
Charleston, South Carolina.*

Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

Luke 2:1-20

The Birth of Jesus

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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.

The Shepherds and the Angels

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, 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.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

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.’ So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Today we affirm that on Christmas morning so many years ago, the world was re-introduced to the God who had spoken it into existence and had declared it good.

This child whom we celebrate is, Emmanuel, which means God with us, and he was and is the Messiah - the holy one of God!

Even before his birth, we could sense something of the impact that he would have upon the world. It was declared by the prophets of old, that he who would be born in Bethlehem and that he would reign on the throne of his ancestor, David, forever.

This was reiterated to Mary when the angel Gabriel said to her that “he will be great, and will be called the son of the most high, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor, David.”

In the fulness of time Mary gave birth and this news was shared to nearby shepherds who were in their fields keeping watch over their flocks by night – it came even unto people who were far away like the wise men who came from the east; indeed, no one was out of reach of God’s love!

It is impressive when you look around town and see the lights and hear the sounds...maybe you went to the James Island County lights this year or you enjoyed the Miracle on the Market...none of that would be here had it not been for Jesus...

What an influence the birth of Jesus has had upon the world...and not just in terms of decorations...consider how more people have followed him than anyone who has ever walked the face of the earth / the volumes of music composed about him / the books, the sheer volume of books that no library could ever hold.

We sang as our Children’s Hymn...“This is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing: haste, haste to bring him laud” – bring him glory, bring him honor... “the babe the Son of Mary.”

Ah, but why is it that we would bring him glory and laud and honor? What can begin to explain the profound impact that Jesus has had and continues to have upon the world? Well, to quote another beloved carol: “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.”

That, dear friends, is at the crux of who Jesus was and what it was that he came to do...we were in desperate need of a Savior...and God sent one...sent his Son.

Perhaps you have heard that age-old tale...that one bitterly cold night when a farmer heard a thumping sound on his kitchen storm door.

Standing near the stove, he looked out the window to see what was causing the noise. The light from the kitchen cast a glow through the glass storm door onto the ground outside. There he saw some tiny sparrows trying repeatedly to fly into the obvious warmth of the kitchen.

Instead, the birds kept beating against the glass to no avail. Compassion for the cold, little creatures caused the farmer to bundle up, trudge through the snow, and open the barn to give the birds a warmer place to rest.

He turned on the lights and tossed some hay in a corner. Then he sprinkled a trail of crumbs to lead them to the barn. But the sparrows, afraid of him, sat in the darkness where they had scattered as he came out of the house.

The farmer tried circling behind the birds to drive them toward the barn, tossing the crumbs in the air toward them, and going back into his house to see if they'd fly into the barn.

Still, the sparrows seemed paralyzed by the cold and fear. They couldn't understand that this huge man was trying to help them. So, he went back into his kitchen and watched the doomed sparrows through the window.

As he stared at the sad scene, a thought occurred to him. "If I could only become a bird for a moment, then I wouldn't frighten them. I could show them the way to safety and warmth."

..."And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (cf. John 1). Oh, imagine how desperate we were and are, that the God of all creation saw fit for an incarnation to be the very required miracle to save us! That he would come down from heaven and become like one of us.

It begs the question, when we go home this morning and eventually remove our Christmas Trees, and put away the Christmas China, and take down the Christmas cards...and I mean, long after December, what about our life and living will tell people about the difference Christmas makes?

The Scriptures tell us what the "shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told to them."

Well, friends, we too have beheld the glory of God, maybe not firsthand, but we've seen it in God's Word, in the lives of those who love Him...and while it may be comfortable or even preferred to stay by the cradle...that's not our calling.

At some point, we have to return home, and put away our lights for another year, and pay our bills...and the stars shine a little less brightly...and the glitter falls off; but for having seen the child, we can and should always rejoice!

We rejoice for a lot of reasons, but not least of which is that the word was made flesh, and nothing can take that from us...nothing in our experience, however difficult or unbearable will ever change the fact that Jesus suffered the pangs of birth and of death, so that we might have life and have it abundantly!

Make no mistake about it, as we settle back into our routines, the real world may seem harsh at times, and it may bear down upon some people harder than others, but even amidst pain and suffering...that does not diminish one iota the gift of God's Son.

Take the Apostle Paul, for example, he can certainly be counted among those people who had a difficult life, and yet he was also able to say, "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice;" and the reason he could say that / the only reason he could say that, is because he knew better than most the redemptive work that God was doing when he first took on flesh and was born of Mary.

Oh, prior to Christmas, we simply did not understand God in a personal way – not like this! No! God had felt distant to us – it was through earthquakes, and wind and fire, and plagues and floods, in burning bushes and rainbows...that's how God had been revealed to us previously.

And that was fine by us. After all, just the thought of a Godly encounter was enough to make us tremble in our boots...but in the manger we found something different! We found

mercy! We found a divine love that we can touch and feel and hold...a tender child that was warm and vibrant and radiant!

That is what Christmas is all about...oh, it was wonderful to see our own children and friends of First (Scots) singing last night and creating a veritable live nativity where I'm standing now...they sang – we all sang...and we are singing again this morning – several of the carols that we have come to know and love about this child!

The point is, we sing about what we have seen and heard – we are not talking about a story that someone else told us...we have seen it for ourselves...and that is important, because that defines the difference.

When we finish writing our thank you notes and when we have put away the ribbons and the tissue paper for another year, when we have finished the last slice of pie...the one abiding quality of this season is to be found in what we have seen and heard!

Not in what we have heard someone else say; not in what we have heard our Sunday school teachers or pastors say on the matter. No! Because we believe by grace through faith that God's love was revealed in a child -- that that singular and transcendent moment gives us joy to know that God is personable / that God relates to us in every way imaginable / that God knows us inside and out –

That's the difference between doing good for goodness sake and doing good for Christ's sake...that's the difference between talking about a God who loves us and actually knowing a God who loves us...that's the difference Christmas makes!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.