

# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “REDISCOVERING THE WONDER”

Scripture Lesson: Luke 2: 1-18

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, December 24, 2024 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

### Luke 2: 1-18

#### The Birth of Jesus

*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.*

#### The Shepherds and the Angels

*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.*

#### The Shock of the Word

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Tonight’s service of worship is very familiar to many of us! We come expecting to hear our choir’s lovely musical prelude, we anticipate delighting in the Christmon Tree and the Poinsettias and the Advent Wreath. We count on singing some of our favorite Christmas Carols and reading the beloved Christmas story from Luke chapter 2. We look forward to celebrating the Lord’s Supper by intinction, and it doesn’t surprise most of us when the lights go out and we sing Silent Night by candlelight. And we are not alone. Churches the world over gather this night, and they too sing carols, and they also read some variation of the story of Jesus’ birth. And this story is not a fairytale. We are not told that “once upon a time” this or that happened. No! The story that is shared with us is located within real history involves real places and real people!

“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.”

Oh, many of us know that story all too well! In fact, we know it so well that it doesn't really surprise us, doesn't offend us, doesn't stir us. Tell me, when was the last time that any of us beheld the glory of the Word of God, and it astonished us or scared us or made us weary for holding it in? Consider again some of the reactions of those who experienced the story of Christmas for the first time! The shepherds, for example; the Bible tells us, “Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”

The King James Version of the Bible, which we read from tonight, describes the shepherds as being, “sore afraid.” And they weren't the only ones. Some months before the birth of Jesus, Zechariah had been approached by an angel while he was performing his priestly duties, and he was told that he and his wife Elizabeth were going to have a son and that their son would play a significant role in preparing the way for Jesus. And upon hearing that news, the Bible tells us that “[Zechariah] was terrified; and a sense of fear overwhelmed him.” And then there's Mary, Jesus' mother; when she was first approached by an angel and told that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and that she would bear a son. The Bible tells us that “she was much perplexed by his words and wondered what sort of greeting this might be.” In all of those interactions, be it with regard to the shepherds or Zechariah or Mary, the angles effectively told them the same thing: “Do not be afraid.”

I dare say that nothing about the story of Christmas frightens us. I mean, I seriously doubt that anyone here this evening before going to bed tonight will pray to God, “God, help me to not be frightened by Christmas.” None of us need to worry about where they will lay our heads tonight, the impact of Christmas is not so burdensome that we must worry about King Herod seeking to destroy us. None of us must go home another way.

No! I suspect that our fears are located in other things, health, homes, jobs, family. Maybe we expected God to come to us at other times and in other ways, and we feel like God has ignored us. Indeed, there are many people for whom this is not at all a Silent Night, and they don't even hope for Bethlehem, because all they have known in their lives is bedlam! Oh, but there is a miracle in this altogether familiar story, and perhaps, by God's grace, we might hear it again, as if for the first time! The presiding image that we have of Mary and Joseph is of them gathering, away in a manger, that place where the little Lord Jesus was asleep on the hay. Oh, ours is the image of a blessed nativity!

“Sleep in heavenly peace,” we rightly sing. Lest we forget, the peace that Christ embodied on that first Christmas Eve, it was not a peace that existed apart from the storms of life. It was a peace that existed in the midst of them! Mary had made that journey to Bethlehem just days before she was to give birth to Jesus and that trip, which was roughly equivalent to the distance between here and Orangeburg, it had to be difficult!

Church tradition places Mary on a donkey, and as some of you may know, the novelty of riding a donkey can wear off quickly. There's nothing comfortable about it, especially for a woman who is in the late stages of pregnancy. When the time comes for Mary to give birth, she must spend her first night as a mother adjusting to the outdoor temperatures and doing so in the company of animals. The setting of a stable was certainly not the place where Mary would have chosen to bring her son into the world and the setting of our individual lives may not be the place where we would imagine God intervening either; nevertheless, the story comes, the Christ comes, and it intrudes upon lives irrespective of our circumstances. Which is to say that the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, the one who is also born in our hearts. Oh, just as surely as he worked within the troubles, and the worries, and the fears of Mary and Joseph, bringing about meaning and purpose, he also works in our lives for good as well!

It shouldn't be lost on us that we are celebrating Jesus' birth during winter's nights. These are some of the darkest times of the year. In fact, the longest night of the year was on the twenty-first. It also shouldn't be lost on us just how fitting it is that this is the season when this story comes to us about the one whom John

declared to be the very “Light of the World” and that light, we are told, “it shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it!” Friends, that is the best of good news for we, who throughout another day have allowed worry to cast a shadow upon the way our feet would go, we, who have looked around and have failed to see the light of eternity, we, who deep down inside are afraid, because we’re not in control and we don’t have the answers and we can’t fix it.

“Do not be afraid.” For the same Jesus who came into the chaos of the world in both a holy and a lowly way nearly two thousand years ago, no less divinely favored are those into who’s troubled hearts our Savior presently comes! Pastor Phillip Brooks put it well when he penned the words: “O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today! We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell. O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.” The gift of God’s Son at Christmas is the gift of God’s love, and it came to a world in distress, a world in need of healing and wholeness, a world in need of God!

Listen again to what the angels said to those shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks by night: “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” That is the message of this night. That God, in Jesus Christ our Lord, he was born into this world, and through his life and death and resurrection we are given hope where there was once despair. Peace is breathed into our troubled hearts, maybe not all at once. God never pretends to ignore the darkness, but God promises to ultimately dispel it! And in its place, joy!

At the end of the day, even though the story of Jesus’ birth may be for us an altogether familiar story, a story that we may even know by heart, it will only be for us the story the story that God intends for to be when it abides in our hearts! The light of Christ can shine in whatever darkness is uniquely ours and God promises that his light will continually push out that darkness, that loneliness, and that fear. Perhaps first making of it but a shadow though, one day, making of it nothing! Because that is ultimately the power of the light Christ! May the story be for us, by God’s grace, slightly less familiar and immensely more astonishing. May it fill us with renewed and faithful wonder!

Ah, let us take this story and, with joy, let us run with it. Let us run so fast that others have a hard time keeping up. Let us go and tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born!

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