

The **Sermon** is delivered by the pastor P as narrator and two readers, 1 and 2, as shepherds:

P Each and every year on this Christmas Eve, we come to hear this wonderful story of the Nativity of our Lord. The story begins with a decree from Emperor Augustus that “all the world” should be registered. This registration is the reason that Mary and Joseph leave their home in Nazareth to go to the town of Bethlehem—the town where Joseph traces his family roots.

But there is so much more to come from this event in Bethlehem. Through Mary’s child who is born in Bethlehem, God’s light of grace will shine for “all the world” and “all the people,” even for all its worldly rulers. Indeed, God has a plan in mind that far exceeds the plans of worldly leaders.

The story we get to hear tonight is the story of the shepherds who were in the region of Bethlehem. Their story will witness this light of grace that shines for us all.

1 We were living in the fields,

2 keeping watch over our flock by night.

P The shepherds seem very much removed from the powers that be. Yet living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks was their job. It may not have been all that much of an exciting job. But there would be some excitement that would unfold for them this night.

That their story begins at night is important. Night implies darkness. The shepherds may not have reflected that deeply about the darkness of the night, but they would soon get a rude awakening as to how much they are in the dark—and we with them.

1 Then an angel of the Lord stood before us,

2 and the glory of the Lord shone around us, and we were terrified.

P The shepherds were not expecting any visitors. And they were certainly not expecting God to show up this night.

But how did the shepherds first react to this sight of the light of glory? They were terrified. And they were terrified because of their fear of God. Now such fear is appropriate, but it is hardly good news for any of us. For when this light shines not only upon us, but all around us, there is no place to hide.

We are all people who are held captive to the darkness of principalities and powers. But this darkness is not simply outside us, but within us—in our sin and our own darkness. And we do not—indeed, cannot—escape our captivity, our enslavement, to the darkness of our sin. When the light of God’s glory shines upon us and all around us, this darkness is exposed, laying bare the truth of our sins. We try so desperately to hide this, to cover it up, to glory in our own self-

righteousness. Even Adam and Eve tried hiding in the bushes to escape notice and become exposed for their sin. We hide because we do not want to be seen as failures. And that is what we fear the most, that we will be exposed, even judged, as the sinners we truly are.

But the fact that God shows up, with his light of glory, is good news!

1 The angel said to us, “Do not be afraid;

2 for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

P The angel’s first words alleviate our fear: “Do not be afraid!” Those words are themselves already words of grace for us when we are exposed in our darkness. As the story of the shepherds unfolds, we will find that God has come to free us from all the darkness of our lives and to give us the light of grace instead.

The angel who shines this light of God’s glory bids us to “see.” To “see” means to trust. We get to trust that God has come with a purpose in mind in this message of the angel. God’s light of glory is bringing us good news of great joy for all the people.

“All the people” means that no one is excluded from this promising light of glory. Everyone may come out from hiding in the darkness, and trust that this light of glory is a light of grace in which God gives us the good news.

Notice also how this promising meaning of “all the people” is a call back to the earlier phrase in Luke 2: “all the world,” referencing the emperor’s registration. This good news, this light of glory, is for our joy as the whole people of God—something for us all to celebrate! By faith, we trust that we are people who are now emboldened to rejoice in that through God’s amazing grace the darkness no longer controls any of our lives or our destinies.

But where that trust is grounded has yet to be revealed.

1 “For to you is born this day in the city of David

2 a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord.”

P Grace comes from the birth of one who will be our great victor over all our darkness! This child is born in the city of David, Bethlehem, the same place and region where God finds these shepherds. Part of the joy of God’s grace is that he finds us in our place and graces us there.

Bethlehem was the place where David was born. That should ring some promising bells for these shepherds, because David was once a shepherd like them—and he went on to become one of the most powerful and well-known kings of Israel.

To be sure, memories of David are further elicited in one of the titles that this is conferred upon this child who is born. This child is called Christ, which means Messiah. As Messiah, he is the anointed one with whom God has made an everlasting covenant. God’s grace will never

run out or come to an end, as surely as God made that promise to David. As the Messiah, this child will bring good news for all the poor, the blind, the lame, and release from captivity for all who are held in the darkness of oppression by the principalities and powers of evil.

But this child also has two more titles. This child is called “Savior”—because he will save us from the darkness of our sins. And this child is called “Lord”—for he will claim us as his very own, so that no darkness can ever lay claim to us again.

This light of grace shines through this child who comes as our conquering hero over all the darkness of our world. There will be no worldly leader who can compare with him. For his reign will overcome all the darkness that enslaved us and kept us in the dark.

Who is this child, this Savior, Lord and Christ? Who is this victor who so graces us with his presence and promise that all our darkness will be overcome?

1 “This will be a sign for you:

2 you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

P This should sound familiar for those who may have heard the part of the Nativity story that precedes the point where the shepherds are first introduced to us. This child is the child of Mary, who “gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger.”

But this sign about this child sounds nothing at all like a glorious conqueror or power to be reckoned with in this world.

Emperors were born in luxurious palaces, with trumpets blaring the announcements of their births. They would be clothed in the finest of linens and sleep on the most elegant of beds.

But not this child. Even as this child bears the same glorious titles of Lord and Savior as any emperor, this child bears all the marks of humility. He is to be wrapped in bands of cloth at the tender hands of his loving mother. He is not born in a palace, but presumably in a stable, because there was no room for them in the inn. And in the lowliness of his birth, he is laid to rest in the most undignified of all places, a makeshift bed where animals feed. In fact, neither here nor throughout the entire Nativity story do we even hear the child’s name. He is simply “child,” “baby,” “babe,” depending on your translation.

How can such a lowly, humble being be seriously considered powerful enough to overcome all the darkness of our world, all the darkness of principalities and powers that hold us all captive?

But wait. For the light of grace on this promising little one is about to shine a whole lot brighter and even more gloriously.

1 Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

2 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

P The song of the multitude of angels might sound something like trumpets playing at the birth of a king. Even so, the only ones to hear it are apparently only these lowly, outsider shepherds on the hillside.

Yet this sound comes from the highest heaven—from the seat of God’s own glory! It declares that God is to be glorified, because it was God’s idea to send us the gift of this child—and that through this child, there will be peace on earth among all whom God favors. Peace means reconciliation—our reconciliation with God. God and sinners are reconciled by this child! That really is a light of grace, for “all the people” and “all the earth”!

This child seems like someone to behold! And when the angels leave them and go back into heaven, the shepherds make their intent known to do just that.

1 Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place

2 which the Lord has made known to us.

P The shepherds come in haste to the site of this great sign. They can’t wait to see this great child of grace. And remember, seeing is believing—trusting the child of grace.

When they get there, they find Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.

And what they see, what they trust, is that this child is so very much like them. One who is very much human, just like them. One who comes in the same form as them, even looking so very much a lowly one like them.

But, oh, how much more lowly this child will be—even to the point of humiliation! And he will do so for “all the people” to bring God’s light of grace to shine upon “all the earth.” Indeed, this child will one day go on to be crucified and once again be wrapped in bands of cloth, to be laid into a tomb.

But that is at the heart of the real joy for us all. For this child is not ashamed to be one of us. He is not ashamed to share in the darkness of our lives, so that he may shine his glory in his very presence over all that darkness. This child comes to take our lives, in all their darkness, as his own, so that we might have his life, in all its glory, as our own.

We trust that this child who is born and makes his place among us, comes for all the lost and lowly strays whom he values and prizes and regards as his own. All who are held in bondage to sin and cannot free themselves, all who are enslaved in the darkness with no measure of light, now are graced with his glory. And in this child’s costly grace, we all are dearly welcomed as those who may share in his Father’s good graces and glory. For when God’s glory comes, it does not come alone. It comes with all those whom God’s own dearly loved child has forgiven and saved.

Now outcasts are brought near, nobodies are somebodies, and one and all are blessed in the

promise of grace that comes through this child who is our light of glory over all our darkness.

As these shepherds, blessed beyond all lowliness, stand in the glow of this promised child in the manger, they become faithful witnesses of the message themselves. And apparently, Mary and Joseph were not the only ones listening in, for there were others who heard the shepherds' witness. These others "wondered" about their message, wondering whether it could be true. Is this child really grace for us and for the whole world? Only Mary seems to have the chutzpah to outright trust what the shepherds had to say, treasuring all their promising words in her own dear heart of faith.

But for the benefit of all these others, and all of us, these shepherds leave Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger not the same way as they came. They came to see, to trust! And when they leave, they return into the world glorifying and praising God. This time the song is their own.

1 Glory to God in the highest heaven,

2 and on earth peace among those whom he favors!

P Such glorifying and praising is a witness to the faith. And wherever faith is witnessed, it shines the light of grace and the light of glory for all around. This faithful witness shines grace over all the darkness that binds people. This faithful witness shines grace right into people's darkened hearts so that they, too, may come to trust and also witness the promise of grace.

Indeed, this faith is the one thing that we truly do get to boast in, to glory in. For its Source is the child, the light of glory, who has set us free!

In faith, the light of glory shines upon us and wells up within us, casting out the darkness for the light of this new song of grace, rooted in this child who came for "all the people." We join the song of angels and shepherds alike, glorifying and praising God. For this child is born for us to save us from our sins, to lift up the lowly and oppressed, to claim us as his own, and to reign in glory for all eternity.

1 For to you is born this day in the city of David

2 a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord.

P Tonight, we, too, are glorifying and praising God for the gift of this child. May this grace reach all the earth with peace—every town and city, every place and palace—and may its joyous good news reach "all the people" everywhere, so that no one in "all the world" is left in the dark. Merry Christmas!