

Sermon for Christmas Eve 2010 Nicosia Cyprus

Perhaps you have heard the one about the attractive young woman who boarded a plane in Calgary heading toward London. The young woman was tired. She knew it would be a long flight, so immediately she asked the flight attendant for a pillow and a blanket. She hoped to be able to sleep most of the way to Heathrow.

Her head had just nestled into the pillow when an obnoxious man with a loud, booming voice boarded the plane... and sat down beside her. He tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Hi there. It's going to be a long flight, so to pass the time, would you like to play a fun game?" Politely, she declined and rolled over toward the window to take a nap. However, the obnoxious man persisted saying the game is really easy and lots of fun. He explained how the game works: "I ask you a question and if you don't know the answer, you pay me, and visa-versa." Again, she politely declined and settled into her pillow.

The chauvinistic man figured that since she was an attractive young woman (and blonde at that) he would easily win the math, so arrogantly he made another offer. "Okay, how about this? If you don't know the answer, you pay me only \$5.00, but if I don't know the answer, I will pay you \$500.00." This caught the young woman's attention and she figured that there would be no end to this moment unless she played, so finally she agreed to play the game.

The man asked the first question. "What's the distance from the earth to the moon?" The young woman didn't say a word. She just reached into her purse, pulled out a five-dollar bill and handed it to the man. "O.K., O.K.," the man said. "Now it's your turn. Ask me a question, any question." She said, "What goes up the hill with three legs and comes down with four?" The man looked at her with a puzzled expression. But then he grabbed his laptop computer and searched all his references. No luck! Next, he tapped into the Airphone with his modem and searched the net, and even the Oxford English Dictionary. No luck! Frustrated, he sends e-mails to all his co-workers and friends. All to no avail.

After an hour or more of searching for the answer he finally gave up... he tapped the young woman on the shoulder to wake her up... and he handed her the \$500.00. Politely, she took the money, put it in her purse and turned away and nestled back into her pillow.

"Wait a minute," said the man. "What is the answer?" Again, without a word, the young woman reached into her purse, handed him \$5.00, and went back to sleep!

Now, that's what you call "rising to the occasion"... and that is precisely what we see a whole cast of people doing in our scripture lessons for today. With the help of God, Joseph and Mary and shepherds and wise men and others rise to the occasion.

Now the story of the birth of Jesus as told by Luke is very familiar to most people. The familiarity of the story can be a frustrating thing for the preacher. However, the familiar can be the preacher's delight. That the text and message are familiar means they already belong to you, the listeners. There is power, enjoyment, and an occasional "amen" when we hear what we already know and believe.

The record of Jesus' birth is straight-forward. It is told as a historian would relate it, citing date, place, and circumstance. It is an earthly event which came straight out of heaven.

It opens with the decree of Augustus that his whole empire should be taxed. Before the tax could be imposed, there must be a census. Everyone was directed to go to their ancestral home for enrolment. Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem. Joseph was a descendent of King David, whose home had been Bethlehem. Jesus is to be the fulfilment of prophecy. Luke weaves the old and the new together as one fabric. The Bible tells one story – the salvation of God.

The innkeeper had no room. The Child is born in a manger. And, the shepherds are the first to hear the good news from an angel: ... "behold I bring you good news of a great joy...for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

What a nice touch God adds to the Christmas event. The shepherds were not only poor and powerless, they were despised by the religious orthodox. Their occupation took them into wilderness where they were unable to regularly observe ceremonial religious laws. Yet the temple authorities needed the shepherds. According to the Law they had to sacrifice the unblemished lambs daily. Those who looked after the sacrificial lambs were the first to know and the first to see the true Lamb of God, who "takes away the sins of the world."

The news of the birth comes first not in a palace hall but in the fields, to the poor shepherds. The shepherds acted immediately. They rose to the occasion. They went with haste to the manger. There they found the babe – a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. Jesus was born to be the Saviour of the world.

That was the first Christmas message. It is still the Christmas message today. That's what we all really need – a Saviour! We want to know forgiveness, salvation, peace with God. A longing both universal and personal. It is ancient and modern. Our whole world needs the Saviour.

You have received many invitations during this season but none is more important, or equal to the one sent by God at Christmas. In Jesus Christ, each of you has a personal invitation from God with an RSVP. There is evil in the world, but we can rise above it. There is much that is ugly and indecent, but it is possible to live a good life. Death is still with us, grief and sorrow, but death no longer has power over us. New life begins in Jesus Christ.

That night when in Judean skies

The mystic star dispensed her light

A blind man moved amid his sleep

And dreamed that he had sight.

That night when shepherds heard the song

of hosts angelic choiring near,
A deaf man stirred in slumber's spell
And dreamed that he could hear.
That night when o'er the newborn babe
The tender Mary rose to lean
A loathsome leper smiled in sleep,
And dreamed that he was clean.
That night when in a manger lay
The Sanctified who came to save
A man moved in the sleep of death,
And dreamed there was no grave. –

Not only "that night" but every night since his birth, people of faith have been able to dream and live with new hope. It's what makes the good times great and the bad times bearable.

Fred Craddock tells about a trip to his home state of Tennessee. He was in a restaurant in the Smoky Mountains. It was one of those informal places where the proprietor is the waiter, the cashier, and the greeter. He moved from table to table, visiting with the diners. He introduced himself to Dr. Craddock and wanted to know who he was and what he did. Craddock confessed that he was a preacher. The cafe owner pulled up an empty chair and sat down, and began to tell his whole life's story.

The man said that he was born in a little town in Tennessee, not far from where they were. It was the kind of town where everybody knows everybody else, what they've done, all the gossip and scandals. His family was poor and his father drank and they were considered the scum of the town. The boy got used to hearing what people said about his family, and thus, him. It followed him to school. On the playground he would hear it from other children. When he went downtown, all looked at him as if he were somehow different from others. His mother wanted him to go to Sunday school, but even the church people seemed to look at him as if they were afraid he might be a bad influence on their own children.

One day a new preacher came to town. The boy went to church. When the service was over he tried to hurry out. The preacher stopped him at the door. He said, "Who are you, son, whose boy are you?" He felt that he would like to crawl into a hole somewhere. The new minister had obviously already heard about his family. But before he could answer, the preacher said with a warm smile on his face, "Wait a minute! I know who you are." He

leaned down and looked closely into the boy's face and said, "I can see a family resemblance. You are a child of God." Then he put his hands on the boy's shoulders and straightened up and said, "Boy, you've got quite an inheritance. Go out and claim it."

God made Christmas for all of us. But there is a sense in which all of us have to make our own Christmas. All the salvation of God is finished and complete, but I still need to realize that and claim it.

No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.

"A Saviour for you is born this day."

Tonight, as you take the bread in your hands, and sip the consecrated wine, let this body and blood of our Lord Jesus once again be the sign of your salvation. We are saved, through the life, the death and the resurrection of one born so long ago in a little town called Bethlehem.

You are forgiven. You are loved. Peace on earth and goodwill to everyone. Merry Christmas! Kalo Kristogenna. Kalo Cristogenna
Amen.