

## A Different Kind of Greatness

Luke 2:1-15

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

December 24, 2019 – Christmas Eve

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In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In this world of men, men are often measured by the accomplishments of their lives. Aristotle, Luther, Bach, and Jefferson are counted by us as great because of their accomplishments. How they lived, what they did with their lives, and how they affected the lives of others – these are the things that seem to matter most. But it's not so with our Lord Jesus. His greatness is not measured by His miracles, His teachings, by what He did, or even so much by what He said. Christ's greatness rather is measured by His death – by the fact that He came into our world to give His Life unto death as a gift. He was born as a Man in the house and line of King David for one, single, solitary purpose: that is, to be a Sacrifice for sin – and to die.

On that first Christmas night in Bethlehem our Lord's birth went mostly unnoticed. Of course, there was that particularly loud-mouthed angel who was so excited that he got the whole heavenly host so wound up that Bethlehem's sky that night was alive and bursting with light and song. And there were also some shepherds who heard the Good News and rejoiced with the angels. But mostly Christ came as just another Child born in poverty – under questionable parentage and in desperate times. Even the appearance of the natal star was ignored by Herod and all his court – that is, until some believers came from the East looking for this King.

When Herod learned of their quest the hatred of Pharaoh pumped in his hardened heart. Even then, up to two years later, the undeniable birth and appearance of this Messianic King was mostly ignored. None went with the Magi to worship Jesus, but waited to go afterwards and kill Him. And it wasn't just Herod who was troubled, so was all of Jerusalem. And having been warned in a dream, the wise men ducked Herod's trap by returning another way. With satanic rage, Herod lashed out, killing every infant boy in the region

in a vain attempt to eliminate this newborn Rival. Jerusalem didn't even appear troubled by this action and said not a word. Indeed, why should they be any more troubled by infanticide then we are by abortion?

But God is not mocked. What they meant for evil, God would use for good. Mary and Joseph spirited their newborn Son away in the night, for it was not yet His time to die. He had yet to be Baptized and anointed by John in the Jordan. He had yet to endure the temptations of the devil. He had yet to send His Apostles out into the world armed with the Keys to heaven. And most certainly He had yet to suffer the full wrath of the Law and be forsaken by His Father in our place. You see, *that* was His ultimate purpose. That's why He was born – to die. He was born to be mocked by Herod's son and Rome's puppet, born to endure the cruel tortures of spiteful men full of hatred and avarice, and finally, born to be executed for crimes He hadn't committed. He was born to be the Sacrifice which would be worthy of saving the most vile, despicable men – to make full atonement and payment for all our sins – secret and otherwise – and to meet head-on all that Justice demands. And all this He did so that shepherds – unnoticed and insignificant to the world – might have peace and be reconciled to God – so that angels might have songs to sing – and so that all us Herods might be welcomed back into the Garden like the prodigal son – that is, with great joy, thanksgiving, and much feasting.

Thus we see in Our Lord's birth a Divine foreshadowing of His death. First, He's rejected by the innkeeper. After all, Jesus tells us, foxes have holes and birds have nests, but there is no place for the Son of Man to lay His head. He's placed into the rough wood of a feeding trough with Mary at His side – dependent on her alone for His own daily bread – while at the same time He is the very Bread of Life who gives true satisfac-

tion to the hunger pangs of fallen men. Later, He would again be laid upon rough wood as His enemies nailed Him to the tree of the cross – again, with Mary at His side. That same cross, for us, is the feeding trough of life, the chalice of immortality, the new birth of our life with God. Rough-born, uncouth Israelites, shepherds on their nighttime watch, would worship Him, as would also Gentiles from the East. So, too, is the Church’s own lowliness and humility foreshadowed here – meek, hungry, and poor – dumb-founded at the glory and mercy of this God who deigns to dwell with men, and to endure the pain of our rebellion to return us to Himself.

We also hear at His cradle-side similar echoes of His resurrection. The swaddling clothes remind us of the burial cloths He would leave behind in the borrowed tomb. The angel’s pronouncement to the shepherds is like unto the angel’s announcement to the Marys in the garden, where he said to them: “Do not be afraid.” Their message is likewise one of peace: “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord” – the One who is born to die and rise again. In Him, Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Ascension are all alike one. In Him Life trumps death, so that death is forever dead – swallowed up, disarmed, and rendered impotent by Life. Christ our Lord doesn’t fight fire with fire, but with water from His pierced side and from the fountains of Christendom. Violent rebellion and hatred are overcome by His submission and love. The darkness of sin has been forever pierced by Light – disintegrated in an instant so that all shadows are gone, creation is restored, the flaming sword which once guarded the way back to the Tree of Life has been permanently quenched, and God is again well-pleased with men.

All of this is certainly fine, good and true. But dear friends, none of it matters a whit if it isn’t

true *for you*. The conviction and hope with which you must leave here tonight is that our Lord God didn’t do all this simply for the benefit of those shepherds, for David, or for Herod – though He most certainly did this for them, as well. Indeed He did this for *all* men. But most significantly – and here it is what you must believe – He did all this also for you. He was born, lived, suffered, died, and rose again *for you*. He knew and loved *you* before He formed *you* in your mother’s womb. It’s *that* Love which caused Him to come to earth to offer His Life to the Father in your place.

God has brought you here tonight to speak into your ears once again His loving words of acceptance and renewal – to give His crucified and risen Body to you – to make things right once again between you and the Father – to pour His ascended, life-giving Blood upon you for strength and encouragement – and to place His Holy Spirit inside you. This One who is of the house and lineage of David – Mary’s Son without an earthly father – Martyr because of our rebellion – is Christ the Lord! This is He who forgives your sin and reunites you with Himself before the Father. This is the One who is the Savior of your soul and the Lover of your heart. It is this One alone who will raise your body and perfect it on the Last Day. According to His unshakeable promise, He will bring you where He has gone. Lo, He who once was laid in a manger’s stall, nailed on a cross to die for the sin of the world, rose again from the dead and is now seated at the right hand of the Father in the glory of heaven – this is He who is with you now and always. He will never leave nor forsake you. Thanks be to God! Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.