

Let us pray:

Emanuel. Emanuel.
Tonight you come to us,
clothed in human flesh. Give us
grace and courage to reach out
to you. To accept all that you
offer to us. May our lives be
transformed by your love. Lead
us to witness to the good news
this day and for ever more.

Amen.



There is a saying appropriate for today: “What we do for ourselves dies with us. What we do for others lives on forever.”¹ All of us can think of someone who has impacted our life because of what they did- whether we knew them personally or just knew of them through the news.

Mother Theresa

Martin Luther King, Jr.

The neighbor next door who brought brownies when she heard about the death of your mother.

Any number of people – known to the public or only to you – who reached out in love in your time of need.

Sometimes someone reached out even when you didn’t know you needed that hand or that shoulder beforehand.

Someone sensed a need and responded with love and grace.

Today we celebrate the arrival of Jesus as a baby born in a manger. A humble beginning to be sure. Not what you would expect of -or from- God.

That evening in the manger, Mary and Joseph, the animals and those who arrived later, all gathered round to see this newborn baby. A baby full of possibilities. A baby whose birth was foretold by ancient prophets. A baby whose birth was trumpeted in the heavens by angels.

And yet, that birth was not in clean, sterile conditions. It was a birth amid chaos. It was a birth that probably caused Joseph to ask “why now” and “why here”. Inconvenient timing- far from home, cold, dark. Probably some- ok, maybe a lot – of grumbling. A city filled full to overflowing. Can’t they see how close Mary is to delivering? Can’t somebody share space so she can be warm?

That birth was God become incarnate. God come to earth to live among us. Emmanuel. Fulfillment of prophecy and scripture.

The birth of Jesus is the reason for much great music and art. We’ve talked before about Handel’s *Messiah*. But that’s not the only piece of music or art that celebrates the wondrous

¹ Source unknown.

things that God has done this night. All of our carols and hymns and music played and sung tonight celebrates the arrival of Emmanuel – God with us.

The “Adoration of the Shepherds” was a theme picked up especially in the Renaissance. If you visit art museums or tour some of the Gothic churches throughout the world, you are likely to see paintings or altar pieces that depict the shepherds gathered around Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus.

Have you ever thought what it might have been like to be one of those shepherds?

First, an ordinary night- probably cold but clear and stars filling the sky. Comfortable – you’ve been a shepherd for years and this is just one more night – at least as far as you know. Trying hard to stay awake- or at least alert enough that if a wolf or other predator comes prowling, you can rise up to scare them off- and then you have to settle the sheep down again. And hope none of the sheep got it in their mind to run off just because... well, just because.

And it gets quiet again when all of a sudden “an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified.” **You bet** they were terrified. Wouldn’t you be? *What is this-* how do I keep my sheep safe from God’s messenger? And *what did I do* that the messenger of God comes to me?

“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 Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord... And you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

Right. Can’t you just hear the shepherds’ disbelief? In a city packed to the gills with people and many, many mangers, how are we supposed to find one newborn child in a manger? *You’ve got to be kidding!*

But Luke tells us that the shepherds “went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child laying in the manger.” And when they found that new family – that new baby wrapped in bands of cloth- the one the angels told them about, they shared with Mary and Joseph what the angels had said.

This child – *yes, this one-* is the Messiah. Talk about turning your life upside down!

And being observant Jews, the words of Isaiah certainly came to mind:

For a child has been born to us... and he is named
 Wonderful Counselor.
 Mighty God.
 Everlasting Father.
 Prince of peace. (Is. 9:6)

Each of these titles suggests hope. Hope for a better life and a better world. Hope that the chaos all around us will go away and our life will not be so stressful. Knowledge that Jesus is the one who comforts us when we are uncertain and afraid.

God waits for us. God waits for us in the form of the baby Jesus. That baby full of promise and potential. That baby surrounded by his earthly parents who undoubtedly were full of love and awe at this new life.

God knows us – every hair on our head according to the Gospel of Matthew (Mt. 10:30). From the Book of Exodus (Ex. 32:32) to the Revelation to John (Rev. 20:12), we find references to our names being written in a Book of Life. We matter to God. Jesus, later on during his public ministry, reminds us that the good shepherd is the one who leaves 99 sheep to find the one lost sheep.

We are counted. We are known. We matter to God.

In 2010, the United States conducted a census. The United States Constitution requires that a census be taken every 10 years. It has been done since 1790. Taking a census is nothing new. The Gospel of Luke today starts with information about registration of the whole world. Whether it is factually true or not in precisely the way Luke states it is not the primary issue.

The issue is that counting people – for a variety of reasons – is not something new. We read in Chapter 30 of the Book of Exodus that the Lord instructed Moses to take a census of the Israelites to register them (30: 11-12). Later, King David conducted a census. So, counting people is not something new by the time of Jesus' birth.

A census is one way of knowing that you matter in the secular realm. Where you live receives tax monies for schools and agriculture partly depending upon data gathered during the census. How many representatives your state elects and the boundaries of electoral districts depend upon how many and where people live in that state. So being counted in the secular realm during the taking of the census brings with it benefits to your subsequent life.

Being counted by God also matters. The scripture is not, however, only a call to do good works. It is a call to live a life that witnesses to the power of transformation of life possible through faith in Christ Jesus. Titus tells us that Jesus is the grace of God and has brought salvation to all.

This little bitty baby born tonight becomes the man who challenges the powers of his day. Our Baptismal Covenant echoes what Jesus taught when we proclaim that we will strive for justice and peace among all people and we will respect the dignity of every human being.

Titus is working with an unruly group of people in Crete who are trying to build the church. Sounds a bit familiar. Some things never change. The advice that Paul gives to Titus and the people of his day are applicable to us today and especially important at this season.

Christmas is the ideal time to evaluate your life and your life's work. Do you live the Good News? Are you reaching out to others around you who may be in need? And, are you doing so in ways that evidence God's grace given to us all.

God's grace is freely given. We cannot earn it. We just have to accept it.

In spite of all the ways in which we fail – or we are less than we are capable of being – God, in the baby Jesus comes to us. Do not be afraid. Like Mary, ponder the words we read today in your hearts. Like the shepherds, glorify and praise God for all that you have heard and seen. Sing alleluia- the Lord has come. The Lord has come indeed. *Thanks be to God.*