

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
December 24, 2020
Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
O Holy Night

—Luke 2:1-11

O holy night! The stars are brightly shining, it is the night of our dear Savior's birth.

O holy night, with a humble birth. The one thing really remarkable about the birth is that it happens in Bethlehem. Remarkable because the prophet Micah foretold Bethlehem as the place of the birth seven centuries before it happened. Joseph and Mary come to Bethlehem simply because they have a distant family connection to the place. They belong to the house and line of David, who grew up shepherding his father's flocks in the fields nearby ten centuries before. Remarkable as David's career was—second king over Israel, vanquisher of Israel's enemies, establisher of Jerusalem as the city of David and Mount Zion as the future home of the Lord's temple—by the time Joseph and Mary get to Bethlehem, there is nothing remarkable there. The greatness of David's kingdom is ancient history. Joseph and Mary are subjects of the Roman world, and they have to come to Bethlehem to be counted and taxed. Caesar Augustus said so.

The parents-to-be are humble people. Joseph is a woodworker by trade, constructing the furniture and implements necessary for everyday life. When Mary brings her ceremonial offering for purification some six weeks after giving birth, she makes the alternative offering that poor people are allowed to bring: a pair of doves or two young pigeons. So the couple has little money to speak of. Even though Mary is pregnant with a due date fast approaching, they are unable to secure anything more than a spot in a stable that can serve as a makeshift delivery room. Mary gives birth to her firstborn, a son. She wraps him up and lays him down in a manger, a wood box or stone slab hollowed out so animals can eat the feed that gets poured in. Except tonight, there's a newborn baby in there. A baby with a humble birth.

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O holy night, in a humbling reality. The humble birth happens in reality, not a fantasy world or a quaint picture-perfect postcard world. A reality where human beings do not love God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength. A reality where people do not love others as they themselves. The humble birth happens in reality where there is poverty, prostitution, and oppression. The rich want to get richer, sometimes at the expense of the poor. The poor want more of creation more than they want the Creator of everything. Men pay women for sexual favors and then condemn the type of women they just paid. Women move in and live with men to whom they are not married. Marriages fall apart. There's public intoxication, gluttony, and a host of destructive diversions. People slander other people and tell lies. There's senseless and tragic violence. Mob rule. Ethnic groups clash. Political factions argue and fight. Justice breaks down; some of the worst criminals go free while the innocent are left to suffer and die. Now maybe you think it's not appropriate to mention these things on such a holy night. But can't we all just address the elephant in the room? It's the night of a Savior's birth. This is the reality the Christ Child was born into. Every one of the real-life experiences just mentioned, every one of them, was something that Jesus Christ heard about, dealt with, or went through in his time on earth.

It's been a tough year. A man testified before the United States Congress that our nation is full of anger; everyone's mad. And he gave that testimony well before March when COVID hit. Think of what he could testify now. Whose life among us has not been affected in some adverse way by the national anger and the COVID and everything else that's been going on? This year has been a harsh reality.

And reality is humbling. All the things mentioned tonight—poverty, prostitution, oppression, pandemics—are some of the ugly reality we can see. But beneath that visible surface lurks an uglier core that is most humbling of all. The reality of human sin. Sinfulness, that is truly our common reality. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There is no one righteous, not even one. The sinful mind is hostile to God; those who are controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. Death comes to all people, because all people sinned. The wages of sin is death.

On this holy night—have you noticed?—God is not giving out rewards for human behavior. God does not come tonight to cooperate with human beings: "Hey, if you love me a little better and give me a little more, if you show a little more kindness to people as I've told you to do, then I'll bless you and send you a happy new year." God is not asking for any human help in saving the world, and that is a humbling reality. Our sinfulness has earned his wrath, not his reward. We cannot work our way into his good graces by being a little bit better. We cannot help ourselves, much less save the world. But God is love. So he does it all. God brings about a humble birth into a humbling reality.

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O holy night, with a heavenly message. The holiness cannot come from earth. It must come from heaven. And from heaven it does. There are shepherds out in the fields nearby Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flocks at night, just like young David did a thousand years before. But unlike David's nights out there, and unlike any night these shepherds ever experienced before, tonight a message comes directly from heaven.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." If you don't believe there is a heaven; if you don't believe there is a God; if you believe in God but hope in vain that the good news from heaven is that God indulges humanity by overlooking human sin; if you believe in God but brood there can't be any good news from heaven because human beings are beyond redemption—if you are one of those people, if you are any human being at all, this holy night brings great joy for you. There is a heaven. There is a God. This God does deal with all the failings of human beings, but God does it in a way that brings great joy to us all.

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." There are heavenly words in that heavenly message, and they are truly good news.

The first heavenly word is *Savior*. Although the angel does not reveal the baby's personal name to the shepherds, the baby was already named months before from heaven. God named the baby. God told the angel Gabriel what the baby's name would be. The angel Gabriel told Mary, while another angel told Joseph, "Name the baby Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." *Jesus* and *Savior* mean practically the same thing. And wow! All the saving this child would grow up to do! Bringing joy to his mother, Mary, who was looking for a Savior. Removing fear from his disciple named Peter, who confessed himself to be a sinful man. Forgiving a woman whose heart was broken over the sinful life she had lived. Raising a 12-year-old girl back to life from the dead, to the joy of her parents. Raising a young man back to life, to the joy of his widowed mother. Seeking out and saving a spiritually lost tax collector named Zacchaeus. Telling a criminal dying on the cross next to him that "Today you will be with me in paradise." Yes, this baby Jesus born at Bethlehem came to seek and to save what was lost. He came to die in our place for the sinners that we are and for the sins we have done.

I recently looked around the sanctuary and counted up the number of manger scenes we have in church right now. There are five. One on the back banner. One in the glass. One on the lectern cloth. One on the front banner. And one in front of the altar. Then I looked around and counted up the number of crosses we have in church right now. Over 30. 20 on the tree. Nine in the stained glass. A few more in the front chancel, including the cross behind the altar. This is heaven's message for us all: *A Savior has been born to you*. He is born into a manger so he can die on a cross in place of sinners. Jesus saves you from God's disfavor, saves you from punishment, saves you from eternal death in hell. God is gracious to you. God forgives you. God will raise your dead body from the grave to everlasting life. *A Savior has been born to you*.

He is *Christ*. There's the second heavenly word: *Christ*. Though we are always subject to last minute plans, maybe especially this Christmas, there was nothing last minute about God's holy night. God eyed this holy night from the first time people sinned, telling the devil that a woman's son was coming who would crush the devil's head. God eyed this night through a strange prophet named Balaam, who saw a star rising out of Jacob, and through a familiar prophet named Isaiah, who saw a virgin bearing a child and naming him Emmanuel. In fact, God eyed this holy night from eternity, as he selected his own eternal Son to save his people from the sins they would do. He gave Jesus a noble title, passed along by the angel on this holy night: the *Christ*, the only Savior selected by God, the only hope for us all.

He is also *the Lord*. The most heavenly word of them all. This baby Jesus, chosen by God to be the Christ, is himself the Lord. Jesus Christ is the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He created the mother he was born from. He made the shepherds and the flocks they were watching by night. He created the angel who was sent to announce his birth. If this sounds astounding to you, it should. Because it is. There is no other person like Jesus Christ, nor will there ever be. A baby and the everlasting Lord in one. He can cry our tears, and then take them all away. He can feel our pain, and then heal us. He can die our death, and then raise himself from the dead. He can come down to earth, and then take us to heaven.

A humble birth into our humbling reality with a heavenly message. *"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."*

Merry Christmas. Whatever your year has been, a very merry Christmas to you.

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