

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The First Sunday after Christmas¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian. For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.⁴

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, 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 Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And the angel said to them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city

He has given it to us out of His immeasurable love for us and as His free and unconditional gift to us. Nor is it a “one-time offer”: it is available to us at any time throughout our entire lives. All we need to do is to accept it.

If you think seriously about that, there is no other Christmas gift that we might receive that could possibly have any real significance or value when compared with that one.

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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Christmas Eve, 2012.
² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).
³ Isaiah 9:2-7 (KJV).
⁴ St. Luke 2:1-20 (KJV).
⁵ St. Luke 2:10-11 (KJV).
⁶ *I. H. Marshall, Luke*, in HERBERT G. MAY & BRUCE M. METZGER, eds., THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA, REVISED STANDARD VERSION 893 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977).
⁷ PAUL J. ACHTEMEIER, ed., HARPER'S BIBLE DICTIONARY 474 (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1985).
⁸ St. Luke 2:4 (RSV).
⁹ Isaiah 7:13-14; 11:1-3.
¹⁰ Isaiah 7:14.
¹¹ St. Luke 2:4-5 (RSV).
¹² *Marshall, op. cit.*
¹³ St. Luke 2:9 (RSV).
¹⁴ Exodus 24:16-17.
¹⁵ II Chronicles 5:14, 7:1-3.
¹⁶ Acts 9:3, 8-9.
¹⁷ St. Luke 2:14 (NEB).
¹⁸ *Marshall, op. cit.* 892.
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of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Introduction and Theme:

This passage is, perhaps, my favorite portion of the entire Bible, for reading it or hearing it always transports me back to my childhood. One of my parents' very few consciously religious teachings came every Christmas Eve, when my father would sit me and my siblings down and read us what he called “the Christmas story”, which was this portion from St. Luke's Gospel.

The King James Version gives Augustus's decree as a “taxing”, the Revised Standard and other modern versions give it as an “enrollment”, but what was going on here was that the Roman government was conducting a census of the population as a means of assessing the tax base in each province of the empire. So while it is true that the preliminary phase of the operation—the one that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem—was, indeed, a census or “enrollment”, the ultimate purpose was to facilitate the levying of taxes on the province of Syria⁶—of which Palestine was then a part—so it is equally true that the circumstances under which our Savior was born were, indeed, conditioned by the actions of the tax assessors.

Even as a child, that always struck me as anomalous. Why should the birth of the heavenly King be the result of activities of the earthly Emperor? Why should the Romans' attempt to tax the people of the entire world known to them be, in any way, connected with God's plans for saving the people of the whole earth, whether known or unknown?

Development:

What is unmistakable, however, is that here, at the very beginning of Jesus' existence as a human being here on earth, the announcement is made that He is “the Christ”, that is, from

the Greek, “the Anointed One”. The concept of the “Anointed One” comes from Hebrew, where it is “the Meshiach”, which we have in English as “the Messiah”. So all of the titles we have for that Man, Jesus—that is, “Yeshua”, or “Yahweh is salvation”⁷—mean “the anointed One”. Thus the full ascription of that baby born in Bethlehem is “Yahweh is salvation, the Anointed One sent from God”.

Next, we notice that “Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David....”⁸ It is important that the child Who would be born to Mary be seen, in earthly eyes, as being a descendant of Israel’s King David, because Isaiah had foretold both that a child would be the deliverer of Israel and that this child would be born of the royal house.⁹

However, as part of that same prophecy, Isaiah had declared this child would be born to “a young woman”,¹⁰ a term that implied that the girl in question was a potential bride. That, in turn, clearly implied that she must be a virgin, for no respectable Jew of that day would have married any woman who was not.

That is why we are told, in today’s Gospel, that “Joseph also went up from Galilee ... to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.”¹¹ The couple would not have been able to have travelled together if they had not been married, in the sense of having had a public marriage ceremony, yet St. Luke’s uses of the term “betrothed”, or “promised” suggests that marriage had not yet been consummated.¹² Thus Mary was not yet, in the fullest sense, a bride, and so was able to be described as “a young woman”.

Nevertheless, the direct focus of the prophecy is less on the degree of her sexual experience and more on her marriageability. It was only after the fulfillment of the prophecy, and the Savior was born to a woman who was, in fact, a virgin, that the

divine nature of His conception became apparent, placing him firmly at the terminus of the line of God’s miraculously-born emissaries to Israel that began with Isaac and extended down to John the Baptist.

When the awaited child was finally born, and the focus of St. Luke’s story shifts to the shepherds outside the town, then “And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them....”¹³ The key words here are “the glory of the Lord”, which is, in Hebrew, the *shekinah*.

This *shekinah* is the intense light, so strong that a person cannot look directly at it, which is the sign of the presence of God. This is the light that Moses encountered on Mount Sinai.¹⁴ This is the light that filled Solomon’s Temple at Jerusalem when it was inaugurated and the Lord took up residence within it.¹⁵ And this is the light that blinded the persecuting Pharisee Saul of Tarsus as he made his way toward Damascus to harry the church there.¹⁶ In the Bible, the appearance of this *shekinah* or “glory” is always a sign of divine activity, which is why St. Luke takes such care to record it on this occasion.

Conclusion:

Finally, the angel announces to those same shepherds, “Glory to God in highest heaven, And on earth his peace for men on whom his favor rests.”¹⁷ You will notice that the translation of verse 14 that I have just read you is a bit different from those that are more frequently heard, but there is reason to believe that it is more accurate as well.¹⁸

For this is the ultimate point of the entire story that St. Luke has told us: All these prophecies fulfilled, all this evidence of divine activity, are foundations for the revelation that God has given us, out of His favor towards us, His Son. We do not deserve the peace of God which is one of the consequences of this incredible gift, but God has given it to us despite our shortcomings.