

Christmas Eve 2022

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Luke 2:1-20

"The Shepherd's Returned"

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

"You cannot stay here." We don't know how many times Joseph and Mary heard these words as they searched for a place for Jesus to be born in the little town of Bethlehem. These words that were said again and again to Mary and Joseph may have been discouraging words for them to hear, but these words spoke the truth about an important message of Christmas.

As we heard again tonight, Mary and Joseph did find a place to stay. The Christmas story doesn't say for certain where Jesus was born. We often conclude that Jesus was born in a stable or possibly a stone cave, however Luke only tells us that Jesus was not born in an inn. Luke only tells us that Mary wrapped up the newborn Jesus and laid him in a manger or what likely was a feed trough for animals. But more than likely Jesus was not born in what we know as a barn, but he also was not born in the fanciest of what we know of as motels today. Jesus took his first breath in a humble place. But this warm place where Jesus was born, would not be the place where Jesus would stay for long.

With the recent snowstorms, we have heard similar stories on the news that sound like what Mary and Joseph may have experienced when Jesus was born. There was a wonderful Christmas-Eve like story on the news of how travelers who made it to Wall, SD were unable to find places to stay in the motels or Inns because every room was taken. But that did not prevent those who were told they couldn't stay there from finding other places to stay. People in the town opened the doors of their homes so that people could get out of the cold and receive meals with these welcoming host families. I don't doubt that several of these people that hosted these people in need have established lifelong relationships. As appreciative as these guests were for being welcomed into these homes, it was never their intent to stay there long.

The place where Jesus was born could very easily have been a house much like those that still exist in foreign countries where animals are kept in a lower level of the house which provides heat for the upper level of the house where the family lives. But again, it doesn't matter as much what the place looked like where Jesus was born, what does matter is that Jesus did not stay in the place where he was born. Jesus not only left heaven to be born a human, but he also left the place where he was born to be our Messiah.

The shepherds who were watching their flocks were interrupted from what they were doing by a host of angels. Shepherds were not used to having angels appear and so there was good reason for them to be afraid. After the angels calmed their fears, the angels gave these shepherds a new job to find the Christ child. Of course, the purpose of finding the Christ child was not like rescue workers whose job was to find stranded motorists in a blizzard. Jesus was not lost. The shepherds who were to find the Christ-child were to become the first preachers to declare that the long-awaited Savior was indeed here.

Maybe Jesus was born in a place with animals like sheep so that these first preachers of good news would feel at home when they found him. The doors that were not open to welcome the poor parents of Mary and Joseph would likely not have been opened for the shepherds who came to find the Christ-child.

You can almost imagine how overjoyed these humble shepherds were to be the first witnesses of the birth of the Son of God. It would not be surprising for these shepherds to forget the flocks they had been tending and stay in this wonderful moment. Luke does not let us know how long the shepherds stayed at this place where Jesus was born. Luke says they went with haste to find the baby in the manger, but Luke doesn't say if these

shepherds even got to spend one night and pay for their room and board by caring for the animals. Luke only tells us that they returned. The shepherds, like Jesus, did not get to stay in the warmth and comfort of the birthplace of Jesus. They, like Jesus, had another job to do.

However, this new job of making known to everyone that they had seen and heard did not need any instructions or encouragement from anyone. They were so overcome with joy that they could not help but to tell this good news to everyone they met. The shepherds did not stay where they were. They returned, but when they left the side of Jesus, they were never the same again. Encountering Jesus in the flesh will never leave you the same.

Have you been somewhere that you wanted to stay longer? This time of year, it is not uncommon to hear of people who have left the not so surprising reality of the winter weather that we have had lately to a place of warmer climate and when they returned, they would have wanted to stay longer. But they also knew they couldn't stay; they would have to return to where they came from.

The shepherds returning after coming close to Jesus is what each of us is called to do too. You are not expected to stay in this place tonight after hearing the Christmas story. If you like the comfort of this place, you will be told by me, you cannot stay here. You must return, but after encountering Jesus, you will not return as you were before you came.

You do not need to be an eloquent speaker to articulate the message of Christmas. The shepherds were not chosen to be new messengers because of their speaking abilities. After the multitude of angels sang to these prairie preachers with words like "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!", none of the shepherds remembered the song of the angels. Instead, one shepherd looked at the other and simply said, "Let us go now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place." The shepherds summarized the story of Christmas by saying, "Let us see this thing that has taken place."

Tonight, you will return to the place you were before coming here. But you will be leaving with the message of the salvation of Jesus in your ear and you, like the shepherds, will want to share what you heard with someone else. If you aren't sure of the words to say, you can do as the shepherds did by inviting others to simply come and see for themselves this thing that took place.

The message of Christmas is Jesus is for you and with you and Jesus forgives you. Return from this place like the shepherds and share this good news of great joy that you too have encountered Jesus. Merry Christmas. Amen