

**The Christmas Story According to Luke
3rd Sunday of Advent, 11 Dec. 2016**

+ *Festival of Lessons and Carols* +

We read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 9, verses 2-7.

² *The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness —
on them light has shined.*

³ *You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

⁴ *For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

⁵ *For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

⁶ *For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

⁷ *His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

My very dear friend Theophilus, as I have told you, I'm in the process of writing yet another book about the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yes, I am aware of the books already completed by my old companion Mark and by the honored apostle Matthew. In fact, I have a copy of Mark's book beside me as I write. Both of these are wonderful books. You mustn't think I'm trying to replace them. The thing is, they've both left out so much that is so important. They ignore some of the most important teachings, for instance. Remember the story of the Samaritan who stopped to help after the priests went by? Or the younger son who squandered his inheritance and

came home to find forgiveness? Two of the most important stories Jesus ever told, and neither Mark nor Matthew even mentions them.

But it isn't just the teaching. Do you remember that time I was in Jerusalem with Paul, when I met Mary, Jesus' mother? She told me things that no one else ever talks about, especially about the circumstances of his birth. She was the one, for instance, who showed me the prophecy about Emmanuel, to be born of a virgin. It's from the prophet Isaiah . . .

We read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 7, verses 10-14.

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.'

Carol

"Emmanuel, Expected Jesus"
Chancel Choir

Ruth Schram

We read from the Gospel According to Luke, chapter 1, verses 5-16.

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

You see, Theophilus, the story of Jesus' birth starts even before Mary, with a cousin of hers named Elizabeth, and her priestly husband Zechariah. They, too, had a miraculous child – not a virgin birth, exactly, just an extremely unlikely one, inasmuch as they were as old as the hills. And their son was John. The Baptizer, the one who led the way for the Christ. Only after Elizabeth was well into her pregnancy do we meet the young Mary

We read from the Gospel According to Luke, chapter 1, verses 26-38.

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

I wish you could have met Mary, Theophilus. An amazing woman. An angel appears to her, and she questions him. The angel tells her that her life is about to change forever, and she says, "All right. Let's do this." And the actual birth was so much worse than she ever could have imagined. Wait until I tell you about filthy stable in Bethlehem where she bore her son.

Carol

"A Child Is Born"
Chancel Choir; Jubilate Bells

Sara Nussel

We read from the Gospel According to Luke, chapter 2, verses 1-9.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Here's the part that everyone else misses in the story. Mark leaves out the birth entirely, and Matthew just wants to make sure we know Jesus is the anointed one from the line of David. But Joseph and Mary weren't royalty in a court. They were a homeless family, forced to travel three days from home to a city where they had no roof waiting for them.

They took shelter in a stable. The Son of God was born a refugee, and when angels announced his birth, they did so not to princes but to the lowest rank of society – shepherds. How can you *not* call attention to that? Choirs of angels sent to ruffraff!

Hymn

“Angels from the Realms of Glory”

REGENT SQUARE

We read from the Gospel According to Luke, chapter 2, verses 10-20.

¹⁰But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Carol

“The Shepherd’s Lamb”
Chancel Choir; flute, clarinet

Dan Forrest

You see, my dear Theophilus, why I feel the need to tell the story again. Because the story is designed to be told and retold and retold. The shepherds saw the child born and went out glorifying God, and so too should we. The angels were sent to the poor and forgotten, and so are we. The child Jesus started at the bottom, and so should we.

My book will be the story of a savior sent to the lowest of the low, to the weak, the poor, the hated, the stained, the Samaritan, the tax-collector, the prostitute, the people of the gutters. And I promise you, my friend, that when I am finished I will send the first copy to you. Just don't keep it to yourself. It's for everyone, and that's the point.

Your dear friend, Luke

Carol

“O Come Little Children”
Chancel Choir, strings and clarinets

arr. David Giardiniere