

Luke 2:7

Christmas Eve • December 24, 2006
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
"The Lord in a Manger"

The Word of the Lord from Luke 2: "And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7)

This is the Word of the Lord.

I have feet: two of them, to be exact. I've never really regarded them as big feet, but they do stick out in front of me.

The reason I bring this up is that, for the seasons of Advent and Christmas, we have a nativity scene underneath the altar. On the first Sunday of Advent, as I was distributing our Lord's Supper, the toe of my shoe strayed a little too far forward and rested on some of the straw of the manger scene, and then pulled it out from under the altar. Then, as I walked back and forth, I managed to spread the straw all across the chancel. I didn't really notice at first; by the time I did, there was quite a bit of straw spread all over the place—for which, by the way, I take full responsibility.

Despite the general appearance of my office and desk, I'm not a big fan of messiness—and I do advocate reverence in the presence of the Lord. Looking down at the floor, my first thought was, "It looks like a stable up here, and that's not fitting for our Lord at all."

That's quite true. When you read of the holy, almighty Lord descending on Mt. Sinai in the book of Exodus in clouds and power, He commands a perimeter around the mountain so that no one unholy even gets near. When He commands that the tabernacle, and later the temple, be built for Him to dwell on earth, He stipulates every last detail, even down to the number of curtain loops. When Isaiah has a vision of the Lord in His temple, the prophet doesn't declare that the place could use a homey feel; rather, he falls on his face because he is a man who is unclean.

So a barn motif isn't fitting for our Lord at all.

See, when you read of the Lord and His power and His might and His holiness in the Scriptures, you get the very appropriate idea that He's not one to be trifled with. When the King comes to visit, you roll out the red carpet—you don't want to spreading straw around.

And yet, here we are on the Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord, where we celebrate our holy Lord's arrival in Bethlehem; and what do we hear of His arrival? Mary "brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." By the Lord's own choosing—by His own holy, perfect will, the almighty Son of God wills to be born in a stable-environment and laid in a manger for His first bed. Is that a fitting bed for our Lord? Not at all. But that is what He chooses.

Why? Because the Lord is not born of Mary to terrify you and me with His righteousness, His power and His "don't-mess-with-Me" holiness. He is not born to pound you with His Law once again and show you how much you are not like Him. No, it's quite the opposite: Jesus becomes flesh to be like you. The almighty Son of God is born with fingers and toes just like you and me. Because we are not holy like God, God has become human like us in order to save us from our

unholiness. That's what the angel means when he says to the shepherds, "Unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

This, dear friends, is the astonishing miracle that the world rushes right by, faster than the Polar Express. The miracle of Christmas is no less than this: Jesus Christ, fully the Son of God, is born fully man. Mary holds her Creator in her arms and nurses Him. The Baby who has yet to discover His toes is preserving the heavens and the earth. It is a miracle and a mystery: do not waste your meditations trying to understand how that Infant can be both fully God and fully man. Rather, rejoice that He is, for this is the Word of the Lord.

Even so, why the humble birth and manger bed? The Son of God could have arranged for Herod's palace easily enough. But He wills instead to have the most humble of circumstances, telling you what is to come. The holy Son of God will save you from your sin, but through service and hardship and humility, not through power and might. He will live a perfect and sinless life, even as He is rejected by man; and He will redeem the world by suffering and dying on a wretched cross. He will redeem you by suffering God's sentence for your sin, so that you might be clothed with His righteousness and delivered to eternal life.

This adds a solemn realization to the miracle of Christmas: the manger in Bethlehem is the first step toward a hilltop called Calvary and His death for the sins of the world. Rather than shy away from that truth, however, remember and marvel: the Son of God wills to become a swaddled baby in Bethlehem because He wills to go to the cross for you.

The almighty, all-powerful Son of God, Jesus Christ, has become fragile, crucify-able flesh for you. He is born to defeat the devil and save your soul. He is born to deliver you from this dying world to eternal life. He is born so that you might be reborn—from sinful flesh to child of God. That's the miracle of Christmas—cling to it and be prepared, because the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh war against it.

By the temptations of that evil trio, you'll be tempted to believe that Jesus was only a human being—just another baby, but one that for some reason became a media sensation and His birthday the focus of the world every year. You'll be tempted to believe that all the talk about Him being God's Son, conceived of the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary is just too wonderful to be true—not because it is, but because your sinful flesh wants no part of that wonderful truth that gives you life forever. Old Adam will tempt you to believe only in Jesus' humanity for another reason: if He's just another guy, then He doesn't have authority to denounce your favorite sins. He can say all He wants that your penchant for lust or gossip or greed is wrong—but He's just one holier-than-thou voice among many, and you can take or leave His advice. That's what your sinful flesh whispers into your heart, and the world agrees. Keep Jesus as just a baby in a manger, a nice symbol of love and peace and cute babyhood; but if He really is the Son of God, then you have to listen to what He says.

Of course, if Jesus is just a little baby and an excuse for time off from work, it means that you have no hope. No one has died to redeem you, and no one is risen from the dead to raise you. Thanks be to God that Jesus is fully human, but also fully God!

On the other hand, if your Old Adam can't get you to think of Jesus as only human, then he'll try to get you to want Him only as God, not man. You know yourself that life in this world has its shares of pains and sufferings, and you know that Jesus has saved you by His own suffering and death. When it is given you to suffer, it will be easy to say, "I do not want to follow in the steps of this Savior, who became man to suffer for me. I want a Savior who acts like almighty God, who will use His power and throw His weight around to save me right now. And if Jesus isn't that kind of Savior, then I'm going to look for someone else who is."

It is easy to think thus when you must patiently endure, to grow angry that the Lord doesn't deliver you on your terms. But remember: the wages of sin is death, and that includes the death of your body. If Christ had not become flesh, suffered and died in your place, He would not have paid the wages of sin for you. Remember the manger: your Savior is born not to throw His weight around, but to save you by His powerful service and innocent death.

That is how your Savior still works today. So if my clumsy feet are going to drag straw around the chancel, let it be a reminder of this: the eternal Son of God, born to Mary in Bethlehem, is no less present with you and me. Instead of a raging flood, He is present by water and Word gently to wash away your sins in your Baptism. Instead of thundering from a dark and terrifying mountain, He speaks His Word of absolution to you and declares you clean and alive in Him. And there, by an altar with straw sometimes inadvertently scattered on the floor, you receive the Lord's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, the same flesh and blood that Mary held in her arms and laid in a manger. The eternal Son of God has become man like you to save you by His life and death, and to join you to Himself forever.

That is why the choir sang before:

*He whom the sea
And wind obey
Doth come to serve the sinner in great meekness.
Thou, God's own Son,
With us art one,
Dost join us and our children in our weakness. (TLH 81:2)*

And that is why, in the words of the same hymn, we declare this comfort:

*Thou Christian heart,
Whoe'er thou art,
Be of good cheer and let no sorrow move thee!
For God's own Child
In mercy mild,
Joins thee to Him; how greatly God must love thee! (TLH 81:4)*

A blessed Christmas to you all, for Christ is born for you.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen