

## "The Sign in the Manger"

Luke 2:12

December 25, 2003

The Nativity of Our Lord -- Christmas Day  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Boise, Idaho  
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The Word of the Lord from St. Luke, chapter 2: And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." This is the Word of the Lord.

In case of fire or some other emergency during this sermon, please note the clearly marked exit signs in the sanctuary: There are two on either side up front, and two in the back. Please do not panic: I do not anticipate an emergency, nor do I plan to preach so long as to increase our chances for a natural disaster. I also understand the inherent danger of beginning a sermon by telling you how to leave the building.

However, I tell you of the exit signs in order to make a point: Wherever you see an exit sign in this building, you will find an exit. If you open up one of the doors underneath an "exit" sign, you will not find yourself facing a brick wall. The exit sign, and the exit that it stands for, go together. The sign and what it stands for go together. The sign does not symbolize something that is somewhere else.

"This shall be a sign unto you," said the angel to the shepherds. "Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." The shepherds were already rattled and fearful; a quite, ordinary night of sheep-keeping had turned most extraordinary indeed. The angel stood before them, speaking these words. Furthermore, the glory of the Lord shone round about them; this would be far more terrifying, because you can't separate the Lord's glory from Him anymore than you can take light into another room while leaving the bulb where it was before. The Lord and His glory go together; if His glory was there, so was He. But where?

The angel told them: The sign was the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. When they found the Baby, they would find so much more, as the angel had already said: For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. They would find the Savior, sent to redeem the world from sin and death. They would find the Christ-the One specifically anointed by God to carry out His saving plan. And (don't miss this!) they would find the Lord. God was indeed nearby-He was in Bethlehem. They would find Him where the Baby was the sign.

Furthermore, as the heavenly chorus then declared, they would find 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 where should they look for the Savior, Christ the Lord? Behind the ox? Leaning against a post outside? Maybe underneath the straw? Of course not. You and I know better than that: The Savior, the Christ, the Lord was wrapped up in swaddling clothes and lying in the

manger. Mary had just given birth to her Creator. The Word had become flesh, and the eternal Son of God would need to be fed and changed on a regular basis. He had fingers and toes, just like you and me; and while all-powerful forever, He was swaddled up in clothes so that He couldn't move a muscle.

Pause for a moment, gaze at the Babe; and, I ask you, remember this about your Savior at Christmas. That Babe is not just a sign of something else, somewhere else. His tiny body is the visible sign of what-or rather, Who-is in that manger for you. It is not that God is just perched above the scene, looking down on the young family and shepherds. In, with and under the Baby's skin and bones is the Son of God, and He is there for you.

In other words, the Baby is not just a symbol of peace on earth, goodwill toward men. He is the Peace. He is the Good Will. He is your Savior, Christ the Lord.

Why do I belabor this point? Because the devil, the world and your sinful flesh want you to look in the manger and see a symbol, but nothing more than that.

This is the sad state of Christmas in the society around you. The commercialized Christmas world sees the Babe in the manger as a symbolic reason to give to others and hold a few celebrations along the way. To the world, He is not the Savior, but simply a symbol of sharing and giving and caring. Christmas is made to be a celebration of our kindness to each other, of all that's "right" with mankind. I must confess that, the older I get, the less logical it seems to me. If Jesus is just another baby and just a symbol of kindness, then why make a holiday out of Him? Lots of babies are born every day: and they sap their parents' income and time, depriving them of both gifts and parties. If Christmas is about man's kindness to one another, the Baby doesn't seem like the correct inspiration. Instead, I'd create a holiday figure who judges people for their kindness. He'd measure whether people were good and bad, nice or naughty, throughout the year; and he'd give them appropriate gifts for their behavior. This would, in turn, inspire people like you and me to act the same way: We would give gifts to those who were kind to us and invite them to parties, and not give such rewards to those we didn't like so well.

That is how Christmas goes in the world, isn't it? A baby just isn't a good symbol for the holiday, if it's about us being nice to each other. Instead, we need a grown-up man-jolly enough, sure, but old enough to have gone to seed and have a bit of a belly. We could dress him up in a festive outfit of red and white, and have him visit all the nice people in the world. If all we need for Christmas is a sign of the importance of kindness-if all we need is a symbol, he would fit the bill far better than a baby.

But I see from your faces that this has already been done.

Please understand: I am against neither gifts nor celebrations. But we must be cautious, lest we lose the real meaning of Christmas in favor of some empty symbolism. Truthfully, the world makes Christmas about our gift-giving for two reasons. One, quite cynically, is that the merchants are hard at work to make it this way: If you are going to give gifts and hold parties, you must purchase your gifts and food and champagne from someone. The more you give, the more they sell. Secondly, though, is this: If Christmas is all about our gift-giving and the kindness of man, then the Baby in the manger is just a symbol-nothing more. He's a sign, but not a Savior, and that's important to the world: You see, if we speak of a Savior, we have to speak about what He saves us from. We have to

speaking of our sin from which we cannot save ourselves. If we speak of our sinfulness, we've shot down the whole "kindness of man" idea.

That's why the world wants Jesus to be just a symbol: To call Him the Savior is to admit that we need one. That's why the world stumbles over the manger and prefers a sleigh ride.

Again, I'm not against gifts and celebrations; I've spent a fair amount of time Christmas shopping, too. But I bid you to return with me to the manger for some Gospel, because the gifts under the tree preach an important bit of Law to you: Eventually, they break. This is not news to you. It is why you hoped for a new sweater this year, because of the way last year's snagged on the sharp corner of the filing cabinet and unraveled. It is why you will never buy your child a toy from that company again, because it fell apart within two hours of assembly. It is why you spent an extra five minutes on the electronics showroom floor, debating whether or not to buy the extended warranty. Things break. It is not a matter of "if;" it is a matter of when.

But those things are only symbols of the greater concern: It is only a matter of time until you break, too. It's only a matter of time until your flesh and blood get tired enough or sick enough or brittle enough that they can no longer keep you alive. That is bad news, that the wages of sin is death. Here is some more bad news: All the kindness and goodwill of man can do nothing to keep you alive. All the symbols and acts of human generosity can't raise you from the dead.

That's why we go back to the manger, because that is where the Good News is to be found. The Baby there, with His mouth and little toes, is more than just a sign; in, with and under His flesh and blood He is the Savior, Christ the Lord. The eternal Son of God is swaddled up in flesh and clothes for you. For you.

Behold where He goes and what He does from that manger. He grows up in perfect obedience to His parents. He's baptized in the Jordan, shouldering the burden of your sin and all that sentences you to death. He proclaims His kingdom for three years. And then, like any other man, He dies—put to death unjustly on a cross. There, He suffers God's judgment for your sin, indeed for the sin of all the world. There, He dies your death.

But unlike any other man, He rises again three days later to live forever. He returns from the grave, still perfectly flesh and blood. Because He is sinless, His body does not see corruption. He is able to rise again after death, and He reigns for eternity.

Now, fellow sinners whose bodies face brokenness, here is a worthy Christmas wish: If only He could share His death and life and flesh and blood with us.

He does.

In your Baptism, He has shared His death and resurrection with you: Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (Ro. 6:3-4). To broken and repentant sinners, He declares, "I did what you couldn't do: I died and then I rose again from the dead. You can't do that, so I've joined you to My death and resurrection. In Baptism, you've died with Me already, and you've been raised with Me already. You still face sickness and physical death in this

life, but you already have eternal life; your body has to catch up with your soul, but already you live forever." What does this have to do with Christmas? Everything! If Jesus did not become flesh, He couldn't die for us or conquer death for us. But because He is born, He will die and rise. That is what makes Him your Savior.

By His Word, He continues to share His life with you. To the paralytic, He said, "Rise up and walk," and the man stood up, completely healed. The Lord spoke and commanded, "Lazarus, come forth!" and the four-day-dead man walked out of his tomb. The Lord says to you, "I forgive you all of your sin, because I've died for you and risen for you;" and with those words, He gives you eternal healing and life. What does this have to do with Christmas? Everything. Again, had Jesus not been born of Mary, He could not have sacrificed His body and shed His blood to win forgiveness and salvation for us.

And, of course, the Lord shares His body and blood with you in His Holy Supper. As we said before, your body and blood cannot conquer death; His has, so it would sure be helpful if He could share His with us. He does. He says, "Take and eat, this is My body....Take and drink, this is My blood...for the forgiveness of sins." Into our dying bodies He gives His immortal flesh and blood-flesh and blood that has already conquered death and lives forever. (We note, in passing, by the way, that many declare that the bread and wine are signs, symbols, and nothing more. However, the bread and wine are signs like the Babe in the manger: They are signs of Who is truly present there for your redemption.) Again, what does this have to do with Christmas? Everything! If the Son of God is not conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary, then He has no body and blood to give you for the forgiveness of sins.

The sign of the Savior, the Babe in the manger-He is the greatest gift of Christmas. I pray that this Christmas finds you well, and that you receive some pleasant gifts for life in this world. And if each gift must eventually teach us that everything breaks in this world, I pray that each gift you give or receive might point to the gift that Christ bestows upon you by His birth in the manger. For whether or not you have received what you wanted this Christmas, He faithfully gives you what you most dearly need: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.