

"When Faithful Shepherds Hear of Jesus' Birth" -- Luke 2:8-20

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Emmett, Idaho

+ The Divine Service of the Word in Memory of Albert Wilhelm Naher +

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O LORD, our Creator, Redeemer and Comforter, as we come together to worship You in spirit and in truth, we humbly pray that You may open our hearts to the preaching of Your Word, so that we may repent of our sins, believe in Jesus Christ as our only Savior, and grow in grace and holiness. Hear us for His sake. Amen.

Dear Emily, Paul, relatives, friends of Al, and members of the Family of Our Redeemer,

It was October 30th this last fall when, in the midst of our visit, Al posed a question. He asked it something like this: "Pastor, if I could be anybody in the Bible, who do you think I would choose?"

I thought for a moment, considering what Al was like and trying to match him up with some of the people in the Bible. My mind began. Perhaps Enoch because he walked with God. Maybe Isaiah the enduring prophet. I thought of Simeon who could depart in peace, according to the Word of the Lord. I could picture Al as the elderly Apostle John, caring in his old age, while in love, not budging a single iota in his doctrine. A few seconds of my silence became several moments.

Finally, Al let me off the hook. He answered his question for me, "If I could choose to be anybody in the Bible, I would pick the shepherds." Now, I must confess to you that the shepherds had not entered my mind. He proceeded to tell me why and as I listened to him, I realized how appropriate it was for him to pick the shepherds. Then it was that Al informed me that the account of the shepherds was to be the text for his funeral sermon.

Therefore, please listen to the Luke 2:8-18 under the theme ...

... *"When Faithful Shepherds Hear of the Birth of Christ"*

Luke 2:8-18 -- And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord.

And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and 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 among men with whom he is pleased!" When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this Child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

Thus far the Word of the Lord our God.

During one eventide, ages ago, they peered into the double darkness of this world. Several shepherds are watching over their flocks by night in the land of thorns and thistles. They are simple, hard-working men - down-to-earth, humble, rugged, gentle, tough, faithful. Though not university-educated they were knowledgeable about the world in which they lived. These shepherds were quite capable of defending their flocks and attacking any assailant who might test them. The shepherds were living proof that real men are not those who are only able to be put up a good fight, but men who humbly trust in the Lord God. We know that these shepherds were such believers in God because of the message they received that night from the angel of the Lord. The message? *Fear not!*

Since the Fall of Adam and Eve into sin, the encounters of angels with men and women are fearful events for the people. Gabriel appears to Zacharias and fear fell upon the man. But the angel said to him, *Fear not, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John (Luke 1)*. The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary. She was troubled and the angel said to her, *Fear not, Mary, for you have found favor with God (Luke 1)*. An angel appeared to several women on Easter morning and said, *Fear not for I know that you seek Jesus Who was crucified. He is not here; for He has risen, as He said (Matthew 28)*.

"Fear not" were the first words spoken by the angel to the shepherds. These particular shepherds did not have anything to fear, for indeed, what the angel had to say would bring great joy to them. The Birth of the Lord's Christ is intended to take away all fear from all people. It accomplishes its intended purpose, however, only for the believer, and then only after the angel commands, *Fear not! Immanuel, God with us*, is a source of anxious and dreadful fear for the non-Christian. While the Birth of the Holy One causes the Christian to rejoice exceedingly, the non-Christian shudders in great fear. Herod heard of the Birth and fear seized his wicked, evil heart and he opened his mouth in a lie. *Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back*

word to me, that I may come and worship Him also (Matthew 2. Those were the last words spoken by that Herod and recorded in the Bible.

How much different were the words of the shepherds and Al. The last two words that I heard Al speak were "yes" and "amen." Last week, with Emily in the room, we spoke the words of the liturgy. As is often the case with the sick and dying, they are not able to say all the words. Therefore, I spoke the words of the confession of sins as I did earlier during this memorial service:

"O Almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them, and I pray Thee of Thy boundless mercy, and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being." Having said that for Al, I then asked him, "Is this your confession? If so, declare it by saying 'yes.'" The second to last word I heard Al say was, "yes." He then heard the words of God's complete and total forgiveness by virtue of Jesus' suffering and death for the sins of the whole world.

Al wanted you to hear this *fear not* as the first part of the sermon. But some may wonder why, for either one is a Christian or one is not, and indeed, this is most certainly true. However it may not always remain that way -- it may not remain either way. To those who are Christians, it is a call to remain steadfast in the faith and to continue rejoicing at the Good News of God in Christ. To those who are not Christians, it is an opportunity for the words that follow *fear not* to show us the heart of God.

Therefore, dear people, all of you who have come this day for this memorial service, *Fear not; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord.* Good News of a great joy which will come to all the people -- which will come to all the people -- to all the people -- to all -- to you, dear people. God's desire is for all, and especially for you, to hear, to believe, and to trust the message of Jesus' Birth with great joy. When faithful shepherds hear of the Christ's Birth there is no need to fear, and the message to them is, *fear not!*

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste.

The angel of the Lord spoke the Word and indicated where the shepherds could find the Savior could be found. The heavenly host sang of the highest glory born in the little town of Bethlehem. The *Gloria in Excelsis* rings out -- across the land and before the men of the field. Angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven rejoice at the wonder of the

newborn King. Then the choir of angels departed from the presence of the shepherds. Their ears must have continued to ring as their eyes adjusted to the dark night skies once again. Their minds had been filled with the wonder of angels and the Good News of their Savior being born.

What would they do now? The shepherds had been told that the Savior would be found wrapped in rough strips of cloth and lying in a manger. This was their invitation to come into the very presence of the Lord God. The Bible tells us that, immediately and straight away, they exhorted one another *to go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that had happened*. And indeed, they went with haste. That is the second word that Al wanted you to hear today, *immediately*.

Just as the shepherds didn't waste any time in beholding the King of Creation, so you should not let another night go by without doing the same. They wasted no time. Neither should you. Dear people, let nothing -- neither flocks in your fields, nor occupation, nor pride, nor school, nor mother, nor father, nor career, nor son, nor daughter, nor spouse, nor *height nor depth, nor any other created thing ... separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8)*.

Whether you are a lifelong member of the Church, a recent convert to Christianity, or have until this moment not trusted in Christ, do not enter eternity without stopping by Jesus' manger to worship Him. Don't let your day of death come without listening to His Word - without seeing Him dying on the cross for your sins - without your eyes beholding His empty tomb on Easter morning -- without lifting up your eyes as He ascends to heaven to prepare a place for you that where He is there you may be also (John 14). When faithful shepherds hear of Jesus' Birth, they go over to Bethlehem to see the Savior, doing so with haste.

The other day, having heard the words of forgiveness, Al listened as the Apostles' Creed was confessed and a psalm was read. Following a prayer which commended him into the hands of the Lord, we prayed the Lord's Prayer. He was only able to mumble along and if you listened to him, you could not make out what he was saying. The words were being prayed faster than he was able to keep up. So when we got to the end, "... for Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory, forever and ever," I stopped and did not finish it. Then it was, from the mouth, the heart, and the soul of this man on his deathbed that he said the last word I heard him speak, a simply, strong "amen." Let it be so. This is most certainly true. Loudly, clearly, and distinctly, "amen."

When the shepherds heard the Word from the angel of the Lord, they immediately went according to the Word of promise, saw the Incarnate Word in Bethlehem's manger, and worshipped the Lord God Almighty. Then what did they do? The Bible tells us.

And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this Child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

The shepherds became missionaries after going to Bethlehem and finding their Savior lying in a manger. The first human missionaries after the Birth of Jesus were those shepherds. They could not help making know what had been told them concerning this Child. First they receive this Word, this Good News of Joy to the world, and then they proclaim it to others. They told Mary, the mother of our Lord. They tell Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus. When faithful shepherds hear of Jesus' Birth, they tell others about it. They live the faith. They returned to their flocks, they return to the mill -- they return to their families, to school, to their everyday life -- now *glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.*

When people hear of Jesus' Birth, they tell others about it. But are they able to do so when they are no longer able to come to church? -- when they are no longer physically strong enough to walk outside? -- when they are only capable of returning to their deathbeds? If it could be done, how would someone on his or her deathbed still be a missionary, getting the Word of the Lord out to others, making sure that his wife, his son, his family, his friends, his neighbors, and the other members of the congregation would hear about the Christian faith? Could someone, even from his deathbed, make sure that others would hear the Good News of Jesus? With God-given wisdom, Al made sure, and here's how he did it:

On January 2nd of this year, at a visit in his home when he received Holy Communion, Al said: "Pastor, during my funeral service the people need to hear Psalm 103. It contains just about everything that is needed. Sing hymns 36 and 39. They are my favorite (fay-voe-right) hymns. Use the account of the shepherds for my funeral sermon. The people need to hear the parts about "fear not" and how they "immediately" went with haste to see the Christ Child and worship at His manger bed. Tell the people about how the shepherds became the first missionaries -- how they told everyone they met about the Birth of Jesus."

Indeed, dear people, having heard this Good News, you may depart in peace, *glorifying and praising God for all the things that you have heard and seen, as it was told to you.* Amen.