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Christmas Eve

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“It Happened”

It happened. That is what Luke wants you to know about Christmas! That is how he actually begins his Christmas story. It happened. *“It came to pass”* is the poetic way of saying it. Now those words are such a matter-of-fact and ordinary way of reporting an occurrence that, in fact, many modern translations of the Bible just leave those words out, regarding them as redundant. For if you are reporting something that took place, you don’t have to say it happened. But Luke says it. He wants you to know. **It happened.** It did. It’s history. It’s truth.

That’s important, especially in our day and age. When many don’t really know if Christmas happened or not. Or how. Many don’t care. It has become a peripheral issue, not really impacting the holiday that many will celebrate this night. It could be truth, it could be myth, pass the egg nog. . . . Now, are things really that bad? Well, witness these disappointing words published in the *New York Times* on Christmas Day some years ago:

“We hear the beating of wings over Bethlehem and a light that is not of the sun or of the stars shines in the midnight sky. Let the beauty of the story take away all narrowness, all thought of formal creeds. Let it be remembered as a story that has happened again and again, to men of many different races, that has been expressed through many different religions, that has been called by many different names. Time and space and language lay no limitations upon human brotherhood.” (*The New York Times*, Dec. 25, 1937, as printed in *Modern Reformation*, Vol. 13, No. 6, p. 9)

With these words, the *New York Times* rightly captured the spirit of our age: whether Christmas really happened or not really doesn’t matter. And Christmas is reduced to an exercise in brotherhood. And that is what we’re told, isn’t it? That Christmas is about peace, unity, and good feelings. And so it *can* be something that happens again and again, every year. No matter what religion. No matter what belief. No matter what creed. And Christmas is turned into something man-made. A time we can all just get along.

But over against that interpretation of Christmas are Luke’s two little words. **It happened.** It matters. It’s history. It’s truth.

And so Luke’s account of the story is *filled* with history. It’s not mythical and filled with fantastic images. It just happened. For that’s God’s usual way of doing things, isn’t it?

The God of history uses history to accomplish His salvation. . . . And so we heard that the government wanted more taxes. That sounds familiar. And so a census had to be taken, so that the people and property could be listed, and then the tax assessed. Caesar Augustus decrees it, and it happens. Cyrenius is the governor of Syria, so he carries out the order. And Joseph and Mary set out for Bethlehem, the hometown for *“the house and lineage of David.”* And without even knowing what they are doing, Caesar Augustus and Cyrenius bring it about that Jesus is born in Bethlehem. Just as God said through the prophet Micah. God sees to it. They are His instruments. **It happened.**

“And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

Again Luke doesn't elaborate. It was a birth like any other birth. It happens every day. A baby was born. A boy. Poor little guy in a manger. And no great fanfare, yet. No one else was there. Just Joseph and Mary. Nobody else even cared. **It happened.**

But that is not *all* that happened. What *really* happened you could not know by looking. You could only know if you were told, and you could only be told by someone who knew what was really happening. The people asleep in Bethlehem didn't know of this birth. As we just sang, *How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.* But near Bethlehem there were some who were told, and they were told by those who knew what *really* happened. By those who bring messages from God. And so the angels come and say what happened. To, of all people, shepherds. *“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”* . . . **It happened.** That is why Caesar Augustus and Cyrenius and Joseph were where they were and did what they did. Christmas is not man-made, it is God-made. So that it could happen. A Saviour is born. Christ the Lord.

“And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” By now, this is what we expect from Luke. Just the facts. Here's how you will find this baby, for all babies pretty much look alike. But only one baby will be in a manger, a feed trough. And the shepherds go and find Him. And then they too speak what has happened. For they heard; they saw; they knew. **It happened.**

And this Luke now wants you to know. **It happened.** But what happened? The Old Testament prophecies fulfilled? Yes. A birth? Yes. But more. God happened. The Good News happened. God is born in human flesh.

Some will tell you that this is impossible. But nothing is impossible with God. He can

do what He likes. But can He love us *so much* – can holy God love us *so much* – as to put Himself into our messed-up world, into what happens to us for our sake, to be our Saviour? The heart of unbelief is to refuse to be loved so much. God can love others perhaps, but not me. Or we may think we deserve God’s love, which is also a refusal of His love. It is to have God deal with us another way, not with undeserved love, but in a way that we would have ourselves to thank, at least for some of it.

But God will have none of that. **It happened.** His love happened. And it happened for you. That is how much God loves you. It happened, and you have been told. ***“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”*** He is there for you. In Bethlehem, in Mary’s arms, in the manger, in human flesh, **for you.** He joins Himself to us and loves us to death, to His death, that His life might give us life. To win for us forgiveness – forgiveness for our sin; for refusing to be loved so much. Believe it, Luke says. **It happened.** It’s truth. And if we have brotherhood with one another, it is not because we ignore or disregard this story, it is *because* of this story. Because the Son of God has come as our brother. To love us. To die for us. To save us.

Perhaps if we had been writing this story, we would have done things a bit differently. Make it a bit more spectacular. Hollywood and all. . . . But no. **It happened.** That’s all. And that’s good enough for God. Let Him be the Lord. The Lord of history, and of you. . . . There’s an awful lot in this world that seems to get in the way, though, isn’t there. Death and taxes, struggle and disappointment. But *is* it in the way? Or is the God of history working through history? Putting you where you need to be? **It happened.** No accident. And no accidents in your life. God is working, in you His sons and daughters. Working His good and gracious will. Working to bring you to Him. Working your faith and forgiveness and salvation.

And so your story may not be spectacular or anything out of the ordinary. That’s okay. Just ask Luke. But God is happening. In your life. In your heart. Fixing your heart where true joys are to be found. Fixing your heart and mind on Christ. Your Saviour, your righteousness.

It happened. You came tonight to hear this good news again. To hear of this love. Such a simple story, and yet such a profound love. But it’s true. He loves you. You matter. *And so it happened.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Normal Nagel for many of the thoughts, words, and phrases found in this sermon. Some of these were first preached by Dr. Nagel on Christmas Day 1975 as published in Selected

Sermons of Norman Nagel, *CPH 2004*, p. 28-32.)