

24 December 2005
Christmas Eve

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Wonder-full Night”

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Tonight we remember something that is very simple and that happens everyday – the birth of a baby.

Tonight, however, we also remember and celebrate something very profound, that *has* only and *will* only happen but once in the history of our world – that this night, the almighty and eternal God was born a man.

For it was not just the birth of another baby that caused the heavenly host of angels to sing out in joy. It was the birth of the Son of God. It was the working of God in fulfillment of His promises. His promises that He would not abandon His creation to the ravages of sin and death, but would come to take those very abominations upon Himself. That in order to save us, He would sacrifice Himself.

And so He comes, all the way down to our depths. To tiny Beth-lehem, which when translated from the Hebrew means “House of Bread,” for He is the Bread of Life. He is laid in a manger, the animals’ feed trough, for His body and blood will be our food. And all this He does not consider humiliating or demeaning, but the greatest honor. For He has not come to be honored by us, but to honor us. Not to be served by us, but to serve us. To lift us up and exalt us. To make us sons and daughters of God.

And so we, tonight, take our place – beside the animals, the shepherds, and the angels – and wonder. Wonder what kind of love would do this for you and me? That the Creator would become a creature. The Ancient of Days has become a child. The One who feeds all creation must be fed by His mother. The Law-giver becomes the Law-fulfiller. And the One who sought out Adam after his sin, now seeks us out – not as sovereign ruler, come to accuse and punish, but as brother and friend, come to comfort and give peace. Come to take our condemnation and in exchange give us His forgiveness. To take our death in exchange for His life. And to take our cross in exchange for His salvation.

That is why the angels sang that night. And that is why we sing this night. The carols and hymns that we love so much. The carols and hymns that speak of His love and tell the story of our Saviour’s birth. The story that we know so well, and yet never grow tired

of hearing. Which is good, for on this story rests eternity. For had not this birth taken place, then also His death would not have taken place. And had not His death taken place, then His resurrection would not have taken place. And had not His resurrection taken place, then neither would *our* resurrection. This short and sinful life would be all there is for us. Death would be the end, the grave our final resting place, and the only thing living on about our life what we chose to put on our tombstone.

But because of tonight, because of this new life ***wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger***, we have new life. This life is not all there is, but only a prelude to the life of eternity in Heaven. Death now is only sleep, the grave now only a portal, and Paradise is open. Open to sinners like you and me. Open to the unworthy made worthy. And the angels who in tears and sadness had to evict the man and woman from Paradise in the beginning, now return in joy and gladness to announce ***the good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people***. For God is doing wonder-ful things! And He is doing them *for you*.

And you see, that's the most important thing about Christmas. That the Son of God is here *for you*. He didn't just come for the world; He didn't just come for "sinners" in general; He came *for you*. That you might be His own. To restore you to the place of dignity and honor for which He created you. Your fall into sin is great, but His salvation even greater. That, as we heard in the reading from Titus, you might live no longer the old way of life – which is really not life at all, but the way of sin and death – and now live a new life. A life not of selfishness and shame, but of faith, hope, and love. A life with purpose and meaning. Life as a child of God. That just as the Son of God was born this night as a child of man, so we children of men might be born again as sons of God. Born again in Holy Baptism. Born again, never to die.

And so it is not only the birth of Jesus, Son of Mary and Son of God, that we gather to celebrate this night, but also *our new birth* that His birth made possible. For we celebrate this night not just because of what God did – but what He did *for us*. Because He didn't have to, but He really, really wanted to.

And so the angels sang, and so we sing. How can we not?

*Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace! Hail the sun of righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings, Ris'n with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by, Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give us second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"*

(LW #49, v. 3)

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.