

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Tonight, we gather here in this place once again to celebrate an event that has come to be known as Christmas Eve. This event is celebrated with a mass, or a worship service that is focused solely on the blessed birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Tonight, we celebrate the birth of love for the world made known in this child who is grace and forgiveness for all humankind. So tonight, I say welcome to all who have gathered here at St. Paul Lutheran Church to join in the celebration of this blessed event.

I can say welcome to you all who have gathered but it is not me who has called you in...it is not my invitation to you but it is the grace of the Holy Spirit that has gathered us all tonight. It is the Holy Spirit who has graciously called us away from the tasks of our ordinary lives. We have been gathered tonight like the shepherds of old who were living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night...who were going about their business, going about their ordinary lives...doing what they do, day in and day out and suddenly, an angel of the Lord stands before them. As the glory of the Lord shines around these shepherds, tonight, the glory of the Lord shines all around us also, in Word, in Sacrament, and shines all around us in the beauty of this sanctuary in the blessed presence of the One whose birth we celebrate. And like the shepherds we too hear:

"Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

This Good News is also heard in the wake of what the prophet Isaiah is telling us:

<sup>2</sup> The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)

While in here, the glory of the presence of the Lord is made known in Word and in Sacrament and shines all around us in the comfort of this gathering, but we hear also that the shepherds were terrified as the glory of the Lord shone around them. Now we may not be terrified, but perhaps a bit frightened at what is currently happening in the world...out there. As we fearfully look at the world we currently live in, some may say it is godless and that those out there continue to walk in darkness. But as we reflect on these passages from our appointed lessons for tonight, may we see that all people, are just like us, going about the tasks of their lives...and this light of the glory shines for them just as that light of glory shines for us tonight.

These lessons tonight are reminding us that God's glory is not limited to the events taking place in here tonight. God's glory also shines on those out there as well...those out there who like shepherds in fields that were considered by social standards of that time to be the outcasts of culture...but this is where we hear that God's light shine...the Good News of great joy shines for all people as Luke reminds us:

"Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy *for all the people*: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

So tonight, may this worship be a reminder that God, the all-mighty creator of all that exists among us, the infinite God of the of the ages upon ages comes to us NOT in a royally perplexing way, comes not clothed in riches and great wealth along with a mighty military escort, but rather God comes among very ordinary folks in a very simple, a very humble and endearing way that ALL

can understand. God comes tonight *to all* people in a lowly manger, wrapped in bands of cloth, in the form of a vulnerable baby.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained the Nativity this way in an Advent sermon from 1933:

“The throne of God in the world is set not on the thrones of human-kind but IN humanity’s deepest abyss, in the manger. There are no flattering courtiers standing around his throne, just some rather dark, unknown, dubious-looking figures, who cannot get enough of looking at this miracle and are quite prepared to live entirely on the mercy of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Yes, we too are the people who walk in the darkness of the world. However, the darkness of the world is not “theirs” out there or limited to those out there...it’s ours in here as well. We too are part of the darkness we live in. And in our so-called righteous efforts we point out all that is wrong in the world out there and then attempt to enlighten our world by judging it to be a moral and ethical mess. We then assume to isolate ourselves from the darkness of the world in order to position ourselves as righteous before God. However, in our attempt to overcome the darkness with our judgments and prejudices we do so with more darkness, more hatred, and more bitterness...this then only contributes and enforces the darkness of the world. The light that overcomes this darkness is this Good News that shines all around us and does so out of pure love for *ALL* because we are all in need of the light and grace that is born this night for all. And tonight, may we learn that the only way to overcome darkness is with light, the only way to overcome bitterness and hatred is with grace and love, the same grace and love given to us this night in the birth of this child.

So, may we then react as the shepherds in the fields do as God’s glory is revealed to them:

<sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. (Luke 2:17-18)

From the fields, the shepherds went and experienced Jesus Christ for themselves and actually told others about this birth of grace and love. In light of the actions of the shepherds, I go back to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident who was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp and later hanged, who lived in the darkness of the hatred of that time and wrote in his last work before he was captured,

There is no part of the world, no matter how lost, no matter how godless, (I would add, no matter how dark)... There is no part of the world that has not been accepted by God in Jesus Christ and reconciled to God. Whoever perceives the body of Jesus Christ in faith can no longer speak of the world as if it were lost, as if it were separated from God; they can no longer separate themselves in pride from the world.<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to say that in the body of Jesus Christ all humanity is accepted and this becomes the call of this worshipping community, known as the “church.” This is our call, to bear witness to this Good News of Jesus Christ as living lord. But here is the catch, we do this in a world that has

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<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, Isabel Best, Editor of *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. The sermon based on Luke 1:46-55, the appointed text for the Third Sunday in Advent, December 17, 1933 entitled, *My Spirit Rejoices*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. Page 119.

<sup>2</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6, Ethics*. Translated from the German Edition, Edited by Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil, and Clifford Green, English Edition Edited by, Clifford Green, Translated by Reinhard Krauss, Chares C. West, and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005. From the chapter titled, “Christ, Reality, and Good” page 67.

turned away from Christ. This Good News of the birth of Jesus Christ is NOT revealed in judgment, in hatred, or in isolation. The Good News of the grace of Jesus Christ is given freely to the world who is just like each of us, sinful and broken, and in need of this grace that is revealed to a world. This grace is the light that we share in the darkness not just through our words, rather through the very lives we live within the darkness of the world. So, if the world seems dark it becomes our task to be that light of grace, mercy, and love amidst that darkness...and not just with words, but our deeds of grace and love.

This Good News of Jesus Christ tonight is the blessed hope given to all amidst the darkness that attempts to shroud this Good News of Jesus Christ through our ignorance, cynicism, and prejudices. Even our sin and human frailty that seems to overwhelm us at times will not darken the light of this precious gift we are given this night.

Tonight a great light is *actively* shining all around us, in here, out there, and most especially in our hearts and in our actions that have brought us this night to this place. Because we have come to this place this night, we have in essence said with our presence here tonight, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." And in this Bethlehem place we know as St Paul Lutheran Church, we also find a feeding trough that is the sustenance of our faith in a Holy Meal of bread and wine set before us. Tonight, as suggested by Bonhoeffer, we are the rather dark, unknown, dubious-looking figures, whose sins are forgiven and who receive the promise of new life in the miracle of bread and wine set before us tonight. We do not just observe, we give our praise and thanksgiving as we become part of this miracle, we become part of this Nativity of our Lord...in this liturgy, this worship, in the proclamation of this Holy Word, and partaking of this Holy Eucharist of bread and wine...we become one with this light of glory that is Jesus Christ. And we take from this place tonight the miracle of grace and forgiveness that has been given to us all and we give life to it when we share that same grace and love with others.

Luther has said that we know that the love of God dwells within us when we take on the needs of our neighbors. Tonight, in this place we have been handed the light of reconciliation and the joy of new life. From this lowly manger, by this Holy Word, and in this Holy Meal we have become God's grace and forgiveness, we have become God's promise of hope, and we have become the light in the darkened world when we recognize God in our neighbor and in those we meet in the darkness of the world.

For *all* the world...*for all the world* God's light is actively shining...it is the light of grace, life, and love that has appeared to us...bringing salvation to all tonight. Born to us tonight is the Good News of great joy...it is Jesus Christ who is hope...who is grace...who is life for us all!

On behalf of St. Paul Lutheran Church, I bid you all a very blessed and holy Christmastide...  
*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*