

CHRISTMAS: RECEIVING GOD'S GIFT OF LOVE

**The Nativity of Our Lord
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2009**

**Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]**

Whose Story Would You Rather Believe?

With the intimate associations of Christmas to home and family, comfort and security, Christmas Eve is not always seen as an evangelical opportunity. And this may not be the best time to pressure people into making a personal commitment for Christ. Yet, Christmas is a crucial time when we can choose whose story to listen to, whose story to believe.

One story blares on Caesar's Network News. This story shows the Emperor literally ruling over the world. Images of Caesar and Roman gods fill every city, proclaiming "Caesar is Lord." This story reinforces the message that you had best submit in order to enjoy the blessings of Roman-imposed peace. Significance and value are defined by how you fit into the Imperial story. In this story, Joseph and Mary were a flyspeck among countless conquered peoples; their role simply to pay tribute and glorify Rome.

Yet there is this little bitty baby...

If it were up to Caesar, you would never hear this child's story. Nothing in it is exalted. The poor travelers have no family, connections, or money to give them a place. They carry only a swollen belly of questionable paternity. The newborn's cradle is gilded with leftover hay and livestock spittle. The witnesses to this glory are the least reputable characters around, shepherds who, filled with angelic visions, abandon their flocks.

If it were up to Caesar, you would not dare to:
 think of responsibilities to any Lord other than Caesar;
 glorify any Lord other than Caesar;
 even hint at challenging Caesar's authority.

If it were up to Caesar, the tables of the powerful would never be overturned. When Caesar hears a story like this, he knows only to crush it, to crucify it.

Yet, in the starlight of those Palestinian hills and in the candlelight of a midnight Mass, we can glimpse a new reality:

where peace comes not from armies, but from justice;
where sin withers in the face of truth;
where mercy rules the arena of human society; and
where love conquers fear.

The angel said, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for *all* the people” (Luke 2:10b, *NRSV*). Not just the few at the top; not just the ones who deserve it. And the angels rejoiced, not at the mightiest humanity had to offer, but at the meekest.

And bless those shepherds. They believed that angelic story, at least enough to go and see. And their fear turned to awe, and they shared this amazing good news. God sought them out, not as bit players in God’s imperial nativity, but that God’s story might become *their* story.

May Christ’s redeeming love be your story, this night and forevermore.

The Reflection for Christmas Eve was prepared by Paul Bellan-Boyer who serves as Parish Deacon at St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church, Jersey City, NJ.

+ + +

This night we remember to pray and offer thanks to God for the gift of his Son, the long-promised Messiah. On this holy night, we open our hearts to welcome and receive the Christ Child. Like the shepherds, may we praise God and proclaim with joy the Good News that the Savior is born.

Activity Corner: The Christmas Story

Gather with members of your household and read together the story of Jesus’ birth as recorded in Luke’s Gospel (2:1-20). Consider reading the text dramatically: assign one person to be the narrator, another to read the angel’s message, others to read the song of the angel choir, and others to read the response of the shepherds. If you have been using an Advent Wreath during family devotional time, light all four candles plus a fifth candle (white), the Christ Candle, and conclude by singing “Silent Night, Holy Night” and/or “The First Noel” or one of your favorite Christmas carols. (If you do not have an Advent Wreath, consider lighting a white candle as you gather for family devotions.)