

Christmas morning service, 2011

Choir sings: Going to Bethlehem

Good morning, and wishes to all of you for a Merry and blessed Christmas from the elders and board of Trustees. As we travel to Bethlehem this morning to once again celebrate the glory and the power of our Almighty God in its purest and simplest form, let's worship with awe. Isaiah told us that this new baby would be called Wonderful, mighty, Everlasting and the Prince of Peace. And in I Timothy 3:16 we read, "without a doubt, there is a great mystery in our religion. Christ was revealed in the flesh, justified by the holy spirit, seen by the angels, proclaimed to the nations and believed throughout the world, and taken up to glory." Who would have had those thoughts that day as they stood before that tiny baby, who was born among the animals, and the shadows in the barn? Who would have thought they'd be worshipping a king, wrapped in bands of cloth and his mother's love, lying in a manger?

Let us sing "Hark What Mean Those Holy Voices"

Testimony: Christian Metz, Marienborn, December 13, 1833

Prayer:

Let us now sing "Now Praise We Christ"

Our scripture is the familiar verses from Luke's account, Chapter 2:1-20

In those days, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

This taxation first took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be taxed so Joseph went up from Nazareth, in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem because he was a descendent from the house and family of David. He went with Mary, to whom he was engaged, and she was expecting her first child. While they were there, the

time came for her to deliver her firstborn son, and she wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. An angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. “Fear not” said the angel for I am bringing you good tidings of great joy for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you, you will find the babe, wrapped in bands of cloth, 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, Good will to men.

When the angels left, the shepherds said to one another, let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us. So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made know all that had been told them about the baby, and all who heard it were amazed. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned to their flocks glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told to them.”

“Fear not, for I bring you good news!” Indeed it was good news, great news in fact. God had saved us. Through this tiny little baby boy, God’s greatest plan was made visible. For the birth of Jesus brought the Glory of heaven right down to eye level. Imagine the shepherds, straining to keep track of their sheep, when before them comes an angel. Can you imagine them squinting, rubbing their eyes, blinking hard as the angel addresses their fear, and then the whole sky opens up with the brightness of all of God’s heavens. They couldn’t help but look up and around, and wonder, taking in the vision, the beauty, the sights and sounds of all that was happening. And then they find themselves in a barn, looking at a newborn baby boy, trying to understand how the

glory of God reaches from the incredible brightness of heavenly beings, to a fragile, boy-child in an animal's trough. But this was God way. In Hebrews 1, we hear these words, "He is the reflection of God's glory, the exact imprint of God's very being, and he brings along all things by his mighty word." Yes, this baby shines with God's glory and by his word, the world as the shepherds, and even us today is held together.

I absolutely love the Christmas story. When Tony and I were little, every Christmas eve before bedtime, we would sit together with our parents, cups of cocoa in our Santa mugs and listen to dad read the Christmas story from Luke's gospel. As we got older, we would take turns reading the story out of the big white leather Bible with the gold edges and beautiful art work. The story and tradition never got old. Maybe it was my creative, artsy mind picturing all the different scenes, and yet I could never reproduce those images that I carried in my mind's eye How do you put on paper the dust and the smell of animals, how do you create the fields dotted with sheep and the poor grimy shepherds, or the surprise on their faces when the angel appeared? Or how do you represent the brilliance of the sky when it is filled with the whole of a heavenly host, or how do you capture the holiness the barn and the newly created family? How do you paint God's glory? I can't do it, and I think that's why I collect children's Christmas books, just to see if anyone can capture the images that dance in my head when I hear the familiar verses.

"Fear not", were the words of the angels to the shepherds that holy night, and they were the same words spoken to Mary the night she found out she was going to be the mother of God's only Son. "For you will be called blessed", and she surely was, and so are we because the glory of God has come to earth to save us all.

Let us now sing a verse of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing"

As we look around our world today, we can surely see the glory of God around us, in creation, the seasons, the flowers of spring, the golden harvest. We see God's love in the eyes of our family and the abundant blessings that come our way, and throughout our days we see pieces of God's character, his goodness that shines through. But in this miraculous pregnancy and holy birth is God's highest glory. His perfection came down to earth, he lived and taught and showed us what it means to live within his Father's will. And then he died, for us, to redeem us, and save us from the permanence of sin that we so easily slip into. God's highest glory came down from Heaven to bring us out of our lowest state, and if we believe in this incredible gesture, then we will in the end be given that same wonderful glory.

It is truly God's finest gift, this good-will to men, made real through the birth of the Messiah. Glory in the highest, for God has redeemed the world. The shepherds understood this mighty act. They were satisfied and accepted this gift of salvation. They took those words from the angels, and hurried to find the manger, and once they saw the Holy baby, they were satisfied, and could return to their work. But they were changed, they returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Their status in the world went up dramatically, and like Mary, they treasured what they had experienced, and gave God's glory right back to him.

Maybe we should take a minute and define what we mean by glory. In the OT, glory is the worth or worthiness of something. And in the OT, the glory of God was seen in the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night as it guided the Israelites through the desert. And the glory of God required you to stand barefoot before his presence, and the brightness of his glory was too much for anyone to see God face to face. In the NT, we add to this definition or worthiness with the idea of glory being tied to the quality of character, or honor. And the face of God became visible in the face of Christ, first as the babe in the manger, then the carpenter's son who grew to be the

teacher of God's truth. And finally Christ was the one whose face was marred with pain as He hung on the cross for you and me. The glory of God's face became real in Bethlehem, and we are able to see a complete picture of the kind of people God wants us to see.

So what are we supposed to do with this great gift of glory that comes down to us from above? Colossians 1: "For it pleased God to tell his people that the riches and glory of Christ are for all. For this is the secret: Christ lives in you, and this is your assurance that you will share in his glory. So everywhere you go, tell everyone about Christ."

That's what we are supposed to do with our new-found glory. We need to revel and dance in it. Let it change us as the shepherds were changed. For God did not pour out his glory, just to light up the sky for a few poor shepherds, or a curious group of wise men from the east. God's glory came for all of us. Christ did not come to show us the way, or teach us a few truths, Christ came because HE is the Way, He is the TRUTH. God's heart is shown to us in the person of Jesus Christ, and he was born so that we can take him in. God wants us to wrap this baby around our hearts and make him the reason we live. The glory that lay in the manger is the glory that we need to breathe and live in. Let his glory lead you to the manger. The author Brennan Manning puts it this way "I come to the stable just as I am, not as I should be, a poor, weak, sinful being with lots of rationalization for my inconsistent behavior. And I come a little frightened because I am called to live out more than I do. The little Child looks at me, smiles and says, "Fear not, I am with you. I expect there to be some failure, but fear not, for I am with you. Peace is my gift to you, Live this day with my wisdom and accept my tenderness."

This day we celebrate the glory of God that came to us in a most unexpected way. But it was God's way and through this extraordinary gift, we have salvation.

The choir will now sing: "The Hands that First Held Mary's Child"

Testimony: B Landmann excerpts from December 23, 1849: The pure child now preparing to be born speaks: Make room. Prepare your hearts. Be still. Allow the Spirit of Grace, with its gentle rushings to break through and prepare the residence of God. When the peace of the Sabbath is found within the soul, when the soul is free from every selfish will, when it has become peaceful and relinquishes itself to grace in loving surrender and acceptance, then in the stillness, this Word is spoken. Lord your will be done. This mighty world is an expression of the power by which the heavens are moved and its echo pierces all eternity. This power commands all things. Even the highest majesties must bend and cooperate to further the blessed work of Grace, and restore God's crucified image. In such a soul, his new creation will be accomplished. Where have you prepared a place for me? Which house, which heart stands open to me so that when I come to be born again, it will not be as before when I found no shelter, no room to lie down. Still I will come and I will see and I will search. The oxen and the donkeys will surely be just as joyous at my birth and will recognize me, I the Lord and Savior. And the shepherds, as they lie restless and unsleeping will surely hear and come to know me. And again it will be made known to them. If only they stay awake and watchful, they will witness the coming and the power of their Friend and partner. All who stand watching, be of good cheer, for the wisemen who await my appearance have learned of it and are coming to see where this treasure, the eternal word is born, so that they can recognize and confirm the oracle. And when I am found, all will bow down and worship.

Let us close with the hymn: Joy to the World.

Benediction: Our closing comes from a testimony spoken by Christian Metz, on December 25, 1854: All praise, love and honor is brought before you in humble devotion and prayer. You were born to provide help and deliverance for all who belong to you. We pray for your sustenance and

continued work among us. We know it is within your power to turn evening into morning and darkness into light. We ask that you grant us a renewed hope and energy as each wonder on our path. We accept your counsel and ask that as we go forth we make our new beginnings according to you holy will, our Lord God almighty.

These things we ask in the name of your holy and precious Son, Amen