

## **Christmas Eve Sermon – December 24, 2010**

### **“The Nativity”**

an adaptation of Walter Wangrin, Jr.’s, “The Nativity Retold

Luke 2:1-20

#### **Angelic News for the Virgin Mary**

North of Jerusalem, in the province of Galilee, in a small city called Nazareth, there lived a young woman whose life was gentle and kind and unassuming, and whose life expectation was that she would one day marry the man to whom she was betrothed.

It was a common expectation, to raise a family. Soon God would change all expectations. This woman’s family would contain a most uncommon wonder – for through this woman God was about to do a new thing.

The man to whom she was betrothed was Joseph, the son of Jacob, of the house of David. He was a carpenter. The woman’s name was Mary, and she was a virgin.

Six months after he appeared to Zechariah in the temple, the angel of the Lord also appeared to Mary, flooding her little house with light.

Addressing her with a celestial greeting he said, “Hail, thou woman so favored by God! The Lord is with you.”

Young Mary was startled by his appearance. She trembled and wondered what sort of greeting this was.

But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary. You have indeed found favor with God. Behold! You will conceive in your womb, and you will bear a Son whose name you shall call Jesus --“

Mary’s hand rose to her chest, where she felt her heart beating hard.

The angel continued; “Your Son will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him to the world to sit on the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the Family of Israel forever. To his kingdom there will be no end.”

“How...?” Mary began, but then she hesitated. She knew this bright and shining messenger was bringing grand pronouncements from God. She dearly wanted to believe him, but one small fact seemed to be overlooked, something so obvious –

“How...? How can this be?” she asked. “I have no husband.”

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” said the angel, “and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born of you will be called Holy, the Son of God. Mary, with God nothing is impossible! Even now your cousin Elizabeth, whom everyone called barren, is with child!”

Mary was filled with joy, and her smile was a delicate and lovely thing. “Behold,” she said, “I am the servant of my Lord. Let it be according to your words.”

The angel departed leaving Mary alone in her house, marveling at the good news she had heard.

## **Mary Runs to Visit Elizabeth**

Soon after the angel had gone, Mary closed her house and left the city of Nazareth to travel south as fast as she could go. She went to Judea, and then to the town of the house of Zechariah. But it was not Zechariah that she went to visit.

When she saw her cousin she cried, “Elizabeth, Elizabeth! Do you know what has happened to me?”

Old Elizabeth gasped, for by the power of the Holy Spirit she understood everything in an instant. She threw her arms around Mary and tearfully exclaimed, “Oh, blessed are you among women, and blessed the fruit of your womb! I am so happy and honored that the mother of my Lord should come to visit me!”

Mary hugged her cousin and said, “You know already!”

Dabbing her eyes, Elizabeth said, “Oh my dear, the moment that you spoke to me my own child leaped in my womb and I knew. Yes, blessed is the woman who believed that the Lord would keep promises!”

Mary could no longer restrain her joy. “Oh Elizabeth, my soul magnifies the Lord! My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For you know I was nothing, merely a woman. God, who is mighty and has done great things for me, has looked down on me and from this day forward I will be called blessed by all people. Holy is the Lord!

“You know the strength of the Lord’s arm. God scatters the proud; drops the mighty from their thrones; but the low are lifted up and the hungry are filled with good things! Our God is helping Israel, just as he promised Abraham and all his children. Oh believe it, Elizabeth, for the Lord is keeping his promises!”

Together they sat, two women carrying two promises of God. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months.

### **Angelic News for Joseph**

Mary and Joseph were not yet married, nor did they live together. But they were betrothed to each other, and in those days that was a very solemn thing. It meant that they had promised their lives to each other; their hearts, their bodies, and all their days. They had made this promise before God and in the presence of their families, and now they were waiting for the wedding day – when Mary would move into Joseph’s house as his wife.

Joseph was a good man; stable, honorable, dependable. Like Mary, he was both quiet and devout. Being a good man, he did not mind that Mary went alone to visit Elizabeth. Neither did he mind that she was there three months apart from him. Nor did he complain, when she returned, that she was somewhat changed; being a little more animated than usual, a little more given to tears, and much more secretive. He did not ask her what her secret was.

Soon her secret began to reveal itself when her womb began to grow. It became evident that she was with child. That good man became a sad man, for it seemed as if Mary had broken her promise to him. Joseph thought long and hard and decided that there was nothing to do but to divorce her.

But Joseph was a just man. The law said that because of her sin he could shame her before all people, but he hated the thought of Mary facing public humiliation, so he

decided to divorce her quietly. All he needed were two witnesses and a piece of paper, and he would end their relationship tomorrow.

It was a fitful sleep he slept that night. It was also a divine sleep, for an angel came into it, and his dreams were filled with the light of the messenger of God. “Joseph, son of David,” said the angel. And the good man, sleeping, listened with a wholehearted faith.

“What, my lord?”

“Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child in her is not of sin but is of Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you, Joseph, shall call him Jesus – because He will save his people from their sins.”

Joseph then knew that there was no need for shame or for sorrow. Good Joseph arose from his bed, gathered both himself and his house, and sent a message of his own. Three days later in Nazareth, Joseph gathered with his friends and strode through the city to Mary’s house to make her his wife.

God was fulfilling what he had promised so long ago through the prophet Isaiah: “A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.”

Now was the right time! Now was the time when the Lord God would keep that promise! The virgin about to bear her son was Mary, and although his given name would be Jesus, his whole being was Emmanuel! God with us!

## **The Birth of Jesus**

Now the birth of Jesus happened this way.

Caesar August, the emperor of the Roman Empire, commanded a counting of all the people so they could be taxed. The order went out to count all families in the cities of their ancestors.

So it was ordered. So it was done.

All over the world, people began traveling back and forth, short distances and long, to the homes of their heritage.

A good man obeyed this order, even though his wife was heavy with her child. She was in the ninth month of her pregnancy and in no condition to travel. By slow degrees, Joseph and Mary moved south from Galilee, into Judea, around the city of Jerusalem. They continued traveling south until they came to their final stop in the tiny town of Bethlehem, which was a city of David.

It was late when they arrived, and the town was full of the family of David; the inn had no rooms available, and in the rooms all the beds were occupied. Soon birth pains began hurting Mary, and she cried softly as Joseph searched for shelter. They knew that the place they stayed that night might be the place where she would bear her baby, for there was little time left.

Joseph came to her and said, "Mary, I have found the place." He led her to the back of an inn, where there was a low stone fence and a rough thatched roof against the wall. It was here that the innkeeper secured the animals for the night. It was here that Joseph lodged Mary for the night. But Mary asked no questions. There was no time.

In a little bed made of straw, Mary delivered her baby: a son. She washed him and wound him in swaddling clothes. It was with mother's hands, somewhat swollen and tired but infinitely gentle that laid him in the manger.

### **Angelic News for the Shepherds**

It was night, and a dog barked far away, barked and kept on barking. But it must have been a private matter between the dog and the stars, because no one else was disturbed. The shepherds' guard dog raised his head once and twisted his ears, and then lay down again. The sheep themselves were sleeping. The fields of Bethlehem were still dark outlines against a deep blue and starry sky – all signs of peace. The shepherds' only concern was to keep awake to watch over their flocks until morning.

They were lying on the ground, leaning on their elbows and talking of common, forgettable things –

When suddenly the whole night lit up with a furious light! The bright glory of God blazed all around them. An angel of the Lord stepped forward, and the animals were stunned cold as the shepherds threw up their arms in fear.

“No. Do not be afraid,” said the angel, but none of the shepherds lowered their arms.

“Good news!” said the angel. “Behold! I bring you good news of great joy, and joy it shall be for all of the people! For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord! This shall be a sign for you.”

Two of the shepherds lowered their arms in order to listen better. A sign! They would want a sign to ratify such news as this.

“You’ll find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”

All at once the deep sky was filled with angels – as many as there had been stars before. They were praising God in a thrilling voice saying, *"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

Then the angels returned into heaven. When the chorus was over, the chill stars shined like ice again, and the night was once again dark.

The sheep began to shuffle and to bleat. The shepherds shook their heads and stared at one another. There was a moment of absolute silence among them, till one man whispered, “Did you-“

“I did! I saw it!”

“Angels and good news!”

“And a sign!”

Then the shepherds, every single one of them, threw back their heads and burst into long, loud laughter. A little band of men under the infinite sky, they thumped one another and slapped their knees and laughed as tears rolled down their cheeks.

“Why not” roared the shepherds. “Why shouldn’t we go to Bethlehem to see what the angel has told us about?”

When their happy laughter had settled somewhat, they did. “Oh, this night!” said one of them as they rushed to the city. “What a beautiful night this is!”

Beautiful and fine. They found the manger. They found Mary and Joseph, and they stared with awe at the baby between them, whom the angel had called Christ the Lord.

*Dear people, God bless your celebration of the Nativity.*