

The Eve of the Nativity of our Lord
24 December, Anno Domini 2022
St. Luke 2:1-20

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear children of the light,

Just a few days ago we passed the winter solstice, the day of the year with the most hours of darkness and the fewest hours of light. We are not far removed from that day and so the darkness still consumes a large part of our 24-hour cycle. It is quite astounding how creation itself points to the working of God in Christ for those who have the eyes of faith to see it.

Our celebration which begins this night and continues tomorrow morning celebrates the in-breaking of the true and eternal light into the darkness of this world. There, in the late watches of the night, the Virgin Mary gave birth to her firstborn Son, just as God had foretold. There, in the darkness of the stable, the Light which no darkness can overcome, He who is God of God and Light of Light, who spoke into the darkness and drove it back by creating light, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity was born to bring the light of His own life into our darkness, to transfer us out of the kingdom of darkness and into His kingdom of light and grace and truth.

This birth was of such consequence that the glorious seraphim of heaven, the fiery spirit servants that stand around the throne of God, were sent to proclaim this great good news to the some of the lowliest among men, shepherds keeping watch over their flocks outside Bethlehem. The angels rejoiced for your sake. They were thrilled that the fullness of time had come and that this child would open again the way to paradise so that you could join with them and the whole company of heaven singing the praises of God who ransomed your life from death. And what was the shepherds response? What other response could there be at the news that not only was the Savior born but that He was where they could find and approach Him but to make haste to see Him, to fall down and worship Him? He was not far removed from them because of their lowliness. Rather, He willed to be the lowliest, taking the form of a servant, the flesh and blood of sinners. What could they do but make with all haste to be with the Christ, to receive Him, to worship Him right where He promised to be?

But a strange thing has happened ever since. You would expect that all men would be rushing to be with their Savior wherever and whenever He is present. You would think that the redeemed wouldn't let anything keep them away from the one who laid down His life to redeem them. But, sadly, that is not the case. To be sure, the Christ is still among us. And just as clearly as the angels told the shepherds where they could find our Lord that night, we too have been told exactly where our Lord is for us today. He is not a sweet child wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger. Rather He is the resurrected victor over our sin and death. He is the God-man, who has ascended into the heavenly places. And He promises to be with His people wherever the good news of His saving work is proclaimed, wherever Holy Baptism is poured out to sinners, and wherever His holy Supper is administered according to His institution. There, wherever two or three are gathered together in His Name around these things, Jesus is in their midst - in our midst - just as present as He was in that manger in Bethlehem to give them life, forgiveness, salvation, peace, comfort, and joy.

But men don't make haste to see and be with the Christ who saved them. They are too busy about the things of this world. They hear the good news but, because their own sin is of small consequence to them, they ignore the Christ and His Word and His sacraments. There are jobs to be worked, hobbies to enjoy, sports to be played. Or worse, they don't at all believe the good news that they have heard, as though the angels made their proclamation and the shepherds simply ignored them. How full of darkness the world must be, full of ignorance of its own sin, full of ignorance of the Word of God, full of ignorance of God Himself that it does not make haste to be near Him. Indeed, the darkness is so utterly dark and so ingrained in our sinful flesh that we don't even recognize it as darkness. We think it's light. We don't blush at our sin. We embrace it and seek to redraft it as good and pleasing to God. Our Lord speaks to comfort and forgive, to heal and to strengthen, and we aren't there to hear. We are told "You will find Him wrapped in bread and wine, lying on the altar" and instead of making all haste, instead of leading the procession to the house of God, we walk the other way. So says our Lord Jesus: "The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed." (John 3:19-20)

How dark are the hearts of men. But the light of Christ is brighter! It alone can scatter the darkness of our hearts that leads us embrace sin and despise His Word. It alone can give birth to faith in our cold hearts so that with unequalled joy we make full haste to be with the One who left His heavenly throne and was born of

Mary to be Emanuel, God with us. It is that light that shines again upon us this holy night as our Savior comes into our midst to proclaim again the great good news of His mighty works of salvation to scatter the dark clouds of sorrow and guilt, sadness and fear. When the bright light of Christ is a constant presence among us, there is no darkness. Darkness cannot exist in the presence of life. When our Savior's Word is heard, there the darkness flees and we enjoy the eternal day of Christ who rose from the dead. In His light we know truth. In His light sin is dragged out of the shadows and exposed. By the light of His Word we are trained to renounce all ungodliness and worldly passions. We are taught how to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, disciplining our hearts, our bodies, and our minds so that we are not dragged back into the darkness of unbelief, of self-indulgence, or of despising the precious means of Christ's mercy and forgiveness.

The light of Christ isn't simply the happy memories of Christmases past or singing your favorite hymns in the warm glow of lighted candles. The light of Christ is the glorious good news that this is your Christ, today, who once lay in a manger, who once lay lifeless in the tomb, but who now sits on the glorious throne of heaven as the Lamb who was slain but who now lives having conquered the darkness of sin and death forever. The light of Christ is that He still deigns to be among us to save us and cleanse us from sin. That is the light that no darkness, no matter how deep, can overcome. Let us, then, in faith, make haste with the shepherds, leaving behind all earthly things, to be with the Christ, the Light of the world, exactly where He has made it know that He will be - wherever His Word is preached and His sacraments are faithfully administered. Come and see this thing that the Lord has made known to you. Merry Christmas!

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.