

† I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good morning.

I. LAST CHRISTMAS EVE WE HEARD about a woman who regretted raising her kids without religion in Christmas, without church and carols, without the nativity set and the candlelight service. She has published no follow-up to that article, no conversion story — yet. She was an atheist, and remains an atheist.

Larissa's perspective was that the religious part of Christmas was probably good, because it resulted in good memories, good family-time, good rituals. She seemed completely unfazed, unmoved by whether or not any of it is true.

The nostalgia she felt — the several-decades-old memories of church and rituals with her grandmother — that spoke to her was not simply fond memories or the mere beauty of Christmastide, but rather comes from the source and font of all that is true, all that is good, and all that is beautiful — the Lord God himself — revealed startlingly and surprisingly as the infant Jesus.

I hope, of course, that Larissa, her husband, and her grown children become Christian — that they put their hope in the very Savior who beckoned these great rituals and music in his honor. But to do so, I think they will have to come to see that beauty is not the cause of Christmas, but rather the result of the truth of Christmas — that our Lord Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary in order to die for our sins and to be raised from the dead as King of all Nations.

Christmas Eve, as is evidenced by Larissa's story, is one of the two most well-attended services of the year, alongside Easter. But rather than lamenting that Christmas Eve and Easter are the two fullest worship services of the Church Year, I have to come to see that *of course* they are the fullest, because the beauty of these services reflect the reality of who Jesus is. The Son of God descended into the womb of Mary; the Son of God died and rose from the dead for the life of the world. Why wouldn't these be the most beautiful and most-attended services? And how could even those who do *not yet* believe *not be drawn* in to the beauty and majesty of Christmas and of Easter?

I do lament, however, that Maundy Thursday and Good Friday were as well-attended, because these two services share with Advent, Christmas, and Easter, the most glorious hymns and the richest rituals. These services are beautiful because they reflect what is good and what is true about our Lord Jesus.

When we see what is beautiful, when we hear what is beautiful, we are drawn into the majesty and splendor and glory of God.

III. THIS EVENING WE HEARD that the baby Jesus was announced in splendor by the angels to the shepherds.

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is stunning, magisterial, world-changing.

What I want to zero in on this evening is how thoroughly political the birth of Jesus is. Let me start with what I do not mean: this passage does not tell us who to vote for or in which of our current political parties we are to belong. That is not the sort of thing I mean by political.

What I do mean is this: This is about the overthrow of all government and the ascending of Jesus to rule over his people, forever. Everything that unfolds is so that Jesus takes his throne as King.

Let's start with the registration; it's a census. Getting a count of the people always tells at least two things: (1) taxes and (2) military might. How many men are of fighting age? This gives the Roman empire a sense of how far it can stretch its might, its land, its conquering. Who and how many are paying taxes? This gives the empire a sense of how much revenue it has for its politicians, its military regime, its social works. And so, as Caesar is

assessing his might, his strength, his depth and breadth of power, that assessment is the very thing that brings Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, to be born in the City of David. Caesar's greed for wealth and power is what brings about the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Christ being born in Bethlehem.

God does not rely on perfectly moral leaders to bring about the unfolding of his will. In fact, in Chapter 1 in the genealogy of Matthew's gospel, we see this exact same lesson. The lineage of Jesus is littered with unfaithful, faithless, murderous, adulterous, idolatrous kings. No matter — God uses them to bring about the birth of his Son, anyway. This reveals something of the majesty and might of God.

In our Daniel Bible Study, we have begun seeing glimpses of this in King Nebuchadnezzar as well. It doesn't matter how evil Nebuchadnezzar may be; God uses him anyway, in fact, as the one who sees the vision of the kingdoms rising and falling, ending with eternal kingdom carved out of stone — the kingdom which we know belongs to this very baby Jesus. But — we will hear more of that in our Epiphany service on January 6th.

So the registration, the census, reveals that God uses the greed of Caesar to bring forth the baby Jesus in humility.

But there is at least one more thing to say, politically. I said that all these things are unfolding so that Jesus takes his throne as King. And you might be wondering, but where does Luke's gospel say anything about a king? It's true, isn't it, that the word "king" isn't there in any of the twenty verses we heard? But we did hear the word "David" three times, and we cannot disassociate David from him being King. It was to David that the promise of an eternal kingdom was given to one of his sons — one of his descendants. And so everything about David in this passage, from Jesus being born in the city of David, to Jesus being of the lineage of David, to Jesus being Christ the Lord, has to do with the fact that authority, the throne, the kingdom was promised to continue forever in one of David's sons. Somehow, some way, the throne would be established forever in *one* of his descendants.

Everything about the references to David in this passage have to do with the birth of Jesus, the King. Jesus is the one who inherits the kingdom of David.

And so, while Caesar strains to demonstrate his wealth and power, our Lord Jesus begins his kingdom, lowly, in a manger, surrounded by animals and his parents and the shepherds.

The King is born!

I suppose that most here are familiar with another story of old, about the City of Troy, about the Trojan Horse. The Greeks sailed away, having besieged the city of Troy unsuccessfully, leaving behind a giant horse. The Trojans brought the horse inside, only to be slaughtered in the night, by cunning Greeks who hid inside horse.

Likewise, we should view the birth of Jesus as absolutely subversive. This is the King who has come to shatter nations and kingdoms coming into the world by immense surprise, entering the world from the womb of the Virgin Mary. And we need not be scandalized by the fact Mary was a virgin. It is among the easiest and more obvious of our beliefs, since our Lord Jesus is fully man and fully God.

This Sunday, on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, we will hear that Jesus coming into the world was indeed a surprise, and Herod responded in fury, wrath, and murder. Such is the way of the kings and kingdoms of this world. This is the reason that Christ came in humility, in subversive surprise, because the kingdoms of this world and the devils who made their home here did not want to be overthrown. Evil always wants to remain in darkness.

Jesus introduces a different kind of kingdom, a superior political order. Even so, Jesus isn't a docile little baby. Even in his infancy, even in this incredibly humble state, note what the baby is able to accomplish. He gathers the sheep and animals to him; he beckons the angels announce him — first the singular angel, and then the heavenly host; and then he gathers the shepherds to him. What does this reveal about the baby Jesus? That he is already the Good Shepherd, that from birth he is the Shepherd of Shepherds. And what about him in the

manger, in the feeding trough of the animals? He has come to feed his sheep — to feed you and me in his heavenly supper.

The angels herald the great cosmic political event: the king has come. Even now, even this evening, he reigns — whether it looks that way or not, whether it seems that way or not, whether we like it or not.

At his birth, all things were unfolding for his surprising and subversive entrance into the world. Now — as we keep watch for his return — all things are unfolding — all time, all events, all people, all actions, all things — to bring about his return in glory.

It's worth being reminded that his return in glory means the end of death, of evil, of rejection of God, and the end of the influence of satan. To tie this altogether, we need only be reminded of our passage this evening from Isaiah, where King Ahaz was given this sign:

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

This promise was given to a most unlikely King. This was a king who had sacrificed his own son by burning him, who had sacrificed to the gods of surrounding nations, who sought alliances instead of help from the Lord. And so, his refusal — from our Isaiah passage — to ask for a sign was not out of humility, but out of pride and disregard for God. He has no interest in a sign from the Lord. But this is, nevertheless, the one to whom the Lord gives the sign and promise of the virgin son's, Immanuel. Perhaps this is the case with some of us — we have no interest in hearing from the Lord. Even so, he speaks to us in his Word this night.

Emmanuel, God With us. Our namesake. God's promise fulfilled where two or three are gathered; God's promise fulfilled when we partake of his holy supper; God's promise fulfilled when he returns in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Our allegiance to Jesus as King vastly outstrips whatever tribal affiliations we have chosen in this world, in whichever party (or lack thereof), or in whichever candidate, or in whichever president. That is not to say that this kind of political involvement and engagement doesn't matter (I think it does!), but that our allegiance remains first and foremost to Christ as King of the Cosmos forever.

We follow Jesus, both now and always, because he is the King, both now and always.

There is much more to say from Luke's magisterial account. For example, there is a theme of night, of darkness, and of God's glory shining through that very darkness for the sake of the shepherds. But then, there is an even more magisterial account of Christ's light, and that is John's account, and you will have to come back tomorrow morning, when it is still, smaller, and more intimate, to hear of Christ's light in the darkness.

For now, keep in your minds and your hearts that God's coming into the world as an infant was the bringing about of a cosmic change of order in the universe. Christ the Savior is King.

So how do we respond to Luke's magisterial, glorious account of the birth of Jesus?

We believe it, first and foremost. Our story, not yet believed by Larissa the atheist, is good and beautiful because it is true. Because Christ was born of the Virgin Mary, because Christ came into the world to save us from our sins, because Christ came into the world to go to the cross for us, because Christ came into the world to establish an everlasting kingdom of all that is true and good and beautiful, we respond by believing this in faith.

And believing this, we sing the carols and the hymns — with full voice — not because they are nice and memorable — though of course they are — but because they are true, and because Christ the Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever. **Amen and amen.**

☩ All Glory be to God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, **Amen.**