

Sermon: Swaddling Clothes
Luke 2:10-12

10 But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ This is the Word of God

For the last 2-3 years, with the pandemic, the flu, RSV, and the daily shootings; not to mention the testing of nuclear warheads by North Korea, and the invading of Ukraine by Russia; we have celebrated Christmas in captivity.

Ordinarily we human beings are really satisfied only when the holidays, as one says, “have finally been happily endured again” and this is readily understood. There is no holiday in the course of the year that moves us so deeply as Christmas, that brings back so many cherished and intimate memories, that awakens in us such strong and deep longings for what has been taken away from us.

Thus it happens that in these holidays we feel somewhat uncertain about ourselves and actually fear continuously that we may lose control over ourselves. Bitterness in bearing the burden laid upon us and revolt against our family that is particularly close to us. We must strive with innumerable contending feelings in our heart. And so it happens that we are really glad when the average daily routine returns again, and the stormy waves of the emotions, which make us restless and uneasy, gradually subside again. Under such circumstances there remains little chance for the joy of the heart, as we knew it formally in the Christmas days and which use to make our souls spacious, luminous, and grateful. We are now people who are tossed back and forth between fear and hope, and who finally can find nothing better to do than to let things take their course.

But now the ancient proclamation sounds in our ears, those Christmas glad tidings with the angel’s announcement to the shepherds in the fields, that moving story of the babe in the manger who would bring to all people Joy and Salvation. Centuries have drawn comfort, joy and hope from it; but today it looks almost as if the era of grace was finished, which is no longer strong and powerful enough to really set the human heart in motion. If we ask the reason for this, however, we obtain a simple, but significant answer: man has fallen into the habit of living his life without God. I do not wish to be misunderstood, I do not mean the people who call themselves “Godless” for certain scientific, philosophical, or political reasons that assert, “There is no God”. I mean ourselves who are assembled here, those in the practice of opening and closing the course of our days with prayer. But God seems to us far away, we think he is not concerned with our planet; it seems as if he has left this Earth to its own devices in order that mankind might at last destroy it completely. From here it’s a narrow step to the question, “How could God be concerned with me, a small, miserable, little man in a time when hundreds of thousands, and millions perish dismally”? The result of such thoughts is that unconsciously we exclude the thought of God from what happens to us day to day, we see only humans and the terrestrial conditions and base on that our hopes and fears. This prevents us from drawing from the Christmas story such comfort, joy, and hope that our fathers did.

Precisely in this plight of the heart the glad tidings of Christmas will bring us help, if only we hear the message properly, and believe it as the word which the living God speaks unto us.

There, then lies the babe in the manger, innumerable poets have sung his praises, numberless painters have pictured him, and since the days of our early childhood we see him though our inner eye, crowned with a halo and transfigured with the romantic radiance which art and poetry have poured upon that scene in the stable of Bethlehem. PICTURE IT IN YOUR MIND.

The reality of the gospel message ignores all this fictitious magic. In the tidings imparted to the shepherds only a twofold “Sign” is named for them and us, two matters which are significant for this child and his identification: This babe is wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. That is all. What does this tell us? First of all, the child that lies there wrapped in swaddling clothes is no less feeble and helpless than any other babe born into this world. The mother must care for him lest he perish, must wrap him in swaddling clothes lest he freeze to death, must nourish him lest he die of hunger. So the swaddling clothes are a characteristic sign and a presage for the life of the man whom it was said on a later day: “He saved others; himself he cannot save.” [Matthew 27:42]. Secondly, the manger likewise is no mere pictorial feature for the enhancement of the poetry of Christmas; it was again a sign, a sign of the homelessness of this babe: “There is no room for them in the inn.” The manger is also an omen, for the babe was to grow into the man who was forced to say of himself, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nest; but the son of man hath not where to lay his head” [Matthew 8:20]. These are the only two signs given to the shepherds and to us also. But if we now look deeper and ask what the human helplessness and earthly homelessness of the infant Jesus can tell us, then the tidings of great joy begin precisely here: the eternally wealthy and almighty God enters into the most extreme human poverty imaginable. No man is so weak and helpless that God does not come to him in Jesus Christ, right in the midst of our human need; and no man is so forsaken and homeless in this world that God does not seek him, in the midst of our human distress. Here God comes down to us and cares for us; and he does not single out the strong and good, but also the feeble and ill. Here, out of the swaddling clothes and the manger comes this call unto us: “Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” [Matthew 11:28]. Here takes place what the apostle Paul comfortingly proclaims to us: “For you know the grace of our lord Jesus Christ, that , though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor.” [2Cor. 8:9]

This is what is so peculiar in the Christmas message of salvation, which tells us, “You need not go to search for God; You should not imagine that He is far from you and is not concerned about what crushes you! He is here and is close to you in the man who was a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, was lying in a manger. All your need is so far from being alien to him that on the contrary he gave himself freely in order to bear it with you.” Whoever can grasp this in faith is not forsaken in prison and in death; for in the worst darkness he may say, “Thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” [Ps. 23:4]

My dear friends on this Christmas holiday let us seek, in the babe of Bethlehem, the one who came to us in order to bear with us everything that weighs heavily upon us. Then we will undoubtedly become aware of the great joy that is announced to us; and out of the brilliance that surrounded the shepherds a shining ray will fall into our darkness. This child is called “Emmanuel, which means God with us” [Matthew 1:23]. God himself has built a bridge from Himself to us.

For sure, the signs – swaddling clothes and the manger- remain loyal to the man after the child has outgrown them. He goes on his way, onward into the depths of mankind: he becomes an itinerant preacher, followed by the common people while great men and scholars face him with explicit skepticism, if they notice him at all. He becomes that peculiar kind of saint who associates with publicans and sinners, with harlots and lepers, He becomes at last the “Man of sorrows”, betrayed by his own disciple, understood by none of his friends, and even deserted by God’s hand – his earthly life ended on the cross. “See, what a man!” His whole life was a path of grief and woe, from the manger to a grave, which wasn’t even his own property. Such is the life of this child, as it unfolds before our eyes.

But God sends us this message about this child: “Unto you is born this day...A Savior, which is Christ the Lord” [Luke 2:11] Our Bible translates “Savior” as rescuer or deliverer, one bringing help when we ourselves are no longer able to help ourselves. The Holy Scriptures do not leave in doubt what sort of need is meant here- from which only a Savior, a deliverer, can rescue us.

That is truly a proclamation which deserves the name “Great Joy”. Fear may now withdraw: “Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great Joy, which shall be to all people.” Surely this is a joy which passes

all understanding; for it concerns God's work, and how could we understand that? This Joy is more than what we human beings may ever dare expect and hope. But it is an object of petition, it is to be believed. It is to the shepherds that was given the first information about the Savior who lies as a babe in the manger. They are simple, plain, people: "to the poor" is the gospel preached in Luke 4:18. They certainly did not have unlimited wishes and no grandiose hopes for their earthly existence; they assuredly did not dream of a paradise on Earth that was soon to come. And whoever does so will always disregard the Biblical tidings about Christ. But he who wishes to reach again an agreement with God and seeks peace of mind may and must be helped. The glad tidings of Christmas proclaim to him: "God is near, to help you; Jesus Christ, your brother and your Savior, is here; fear not, only believe!"

Prayer:

My Lord and Creator, your goodness encourages me to converse with you. Your mercy abolishes the chasm which separates the Creator from the creature. To converse with You, O Lord, is the delight of my heart. In you I find everything that my heart could desire. Your light illuminates my mind, enabling it to know You more and more deeply. Here streams of graces flow down upon my heart. Here my soul draws eternal life. O my Lord and creator, You alone, beyond all these gifts, give Your own self to me and unite Yourself intimately with Your miserable creature. AMEN

Benediction:

And we, dear friends, who are cut off from the outside world, inactive spectators of all men's battles and convulsions, we who have daily many hours to gaze inwardly and to understand ourselves clearly, we who often miss so painfully the peace of mind because we do not look at God and His word, but rather at mortals and their doings – should not our inward hearings be especially receptive to the tidings brought to us by the Christmas gospel? Should not the sayings about the "Great Joy" concern us in particular, since we know fear – fear of death as well as fear of life? Let us therefore today, on this Holy Christmas Holiday, beg the Lord Jesus Christ that he, who came as a babe into a world alienated from God in order to save it, may enter also into us, bring us his salvation, and grant us his Joy! AMEN