

King of Glory Lutheran Church - Christmas Eve 2017  
Luke 2:1-20 "The Good News Gift"  
Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry

Grace and peace to you this night from Jesus our Savior! Hear the Good News again – to you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord! What a gift! What a gift of love!

Speaking of gifts, does everybody have their shopping done? All the gifts purchased? Wrapped? Mailed? Emailed?

Ok – just an informal survey here – who opens gifts on Christmas Eve? Who opens gifts on Christmas Day? So you found just the best gifts, yes? The perfect card, or sweater for her, or coat for him, or jewelry, or chain saw? And if you didn't find the right gift, you just re-gifted something. Right? Anybody re-gift this year? Come on. Everyone has done it. You're telling me you've never re-gifted? Shouldn't lie to a pastor!

Well, I'm here to remind you that the best gift this Christmas isn't lying at home under your tree. The best gift is the Good News of Jesus' birth! You heard it, right? To you, and you and you, and you and you and you and all of you (I can't count everyone or we won't get out of here until New Year's) and me is born this day, a Savior, who is the Lord!

Now none of us asked for this gift, did we? I could guess that none of us put "Jesus" at the top of our Christmas gift list. Well, neither did the shepherds. They were out in the fields, just doing their job, when without warning, a bright angel's presence filled the sky. The sight terrified them even before the creature began to speak. When it did, it said it was there to share Good News of great joy for all people!

"To you is born this day in the city of David (meaning, Bethlehem) a Savior – who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Maybe they didn't know what to say. Perhaps they could hardly breathe. The angel appearance certainly was unexpected. But this! This was Good News!

Being occupied by Rome was no real way to live. The point of this current census was to more accurately tax the non-Roman citizens who were already under heavy, heavy taxation to the point of poverty. Occupation was a hard life.

But there was something about the angel's message. The wording sounded familiar...ah! The birth announcement of Caesar Augustus was always spoken of as the beginning of the 'Good News'. But the angel said, "Savior" and "Messiah" meaning 'anointed one', 'chosen one.' Could it be the Savior the Jewish people had so long waited for? They had anticipated the Messiah's arrival for centuries!

Can you think of a time when you were given a gift – maybe on a Birthday or Anniversary – or maybe at Christmas and you were simply overcome? "I don't deserve this! Oh my goodness! What is this?! What have you done – you got me....!" Or for the more extroverted and unreserved the response sounds more like this. "YES!" (pulling arm down in champion motion)

When the gift is lying in our laps, unopened, we don't say to the giver, "Well, I'll only accept your present if it's the right color, or if I like it, or if it meets my needs, or is the most popular brand....only then will I receive your gift." NO! We just open our arms and take it!

God had been trying to get the people to hear, to sense, to grasp God for a long, long time. So with this particular gift, God had to find a new way for them to perceive God's love.

There was a man who worked with emotionally disturbed children in a church home. He tells this story of a young boy named Tommy.

### **Take Hold of Love**

***By Henry Carter (Henry Carter's story is courtesy of Guideposts.)***

I was working feverishly on my Christmas sermon--the hardest time in any minister's year to find something fresh to say--when the floor mother appeared at the study door. Another crisis upstairs. Christmas Eve is a difficult day for the emotionally disturbed children in our church home. Three-quarters of them go home at least overnight, and the ones who remain react to the empty beds and the changed routine.

I followed her up the stairs, chafing inwardly at the repeated interruptions. This time it was Tommy. He had crawled under a bed and refused to come out. The woman pointed to one of six cots in the small dormitory. Not a hair or a toe showed beneath it, so I addressed myself to the cowboys and bucking broncos on the bedspread. I talked about the brightly lighted tree in the church vestibule next door and the packages underneath it and all the other good things waiting for him out beyond that bed.

No answer.

Still fretting at the time this was costing, I dropped to my hands and knees and lifted the spread. Two enormous blue eyes met mine. Tommy was eight, but looked like a five-year-old. It would have been no effort at all simply to pull him out. But it wasn't pulling that Tommy needed--it was trust and a sense of deciding things on his own initiative. So, crouched there on all fours, I launched into the menu of the special Christmas Eve supper to be offered after the service. I told him about the stocking with his name on it provided by the women's society.

Silence. There was no indication that he either heard or cared about Christmas. And at last, because I could think of no other way to make contact, I got down on my stomach and wriggled in beside him, bedsprings snagging my suit jacket. For what seemed a long time I lay there with my cheek pressed against the floor. At first I talked about the big wreath above the altar and the candles in the windows. I reminded him of the carol he and the other children were going to sing. Then I ran out of things to say and simply waited there beside him.

And as I waited, a small, chilled hand crept into mine.

"You know, Tommy," I said after a bit, "it's kind of close quarters under here. Let's you and me go out where we can stand up."

And so we did, but slowly, in no hurry.

All the pressure had gone from my day, because, you see, I had my Christmas sermon. Flattened there on the floor I realized I had been given a new glimpse of the mystery of this season. Hadn't God called us, too, as I'd called Tommy, from far above us? With His stars and mountains, His whole majestic creation, hadn't He pleaded with us to love Him, to enjoy the universe He had given us?

And when we would not listen, He had drawn closer. Through prophets and law-givers and holy men, He spoke with us face to face.

But it was not until that first Christmas, not until God stooped to earth itself, not until He came to dwell with us in our loneliness and alienation, that we, like Tommy, dared to stretch out our hands to take hold of love. ([www.thefamilyinternational.org/christmas/article7f57.html](http://www.thefamilyinternational.org/christmas/article7f57.html))

To take hold of Love. To receive the gift and the giver.

It was that first Christmas when God with skin on, God Emmanuel, arrived not in a royal palace, but amongst the sheep manure and human sweat. The hay poked. No silk sheets for this baby. And it was shepherds who got to hear the news first. These men at the bottom of their socio-economic ladder, smelly from their daily labor, social outcasts at best. As they stood in amazement gazing at Joseph, Mary and a beautiful baby, they knew...something was different about this Savior.

He wasn't lying under the bed, cheek pressed to the floor bedsprings poking him, but God was lying in a manger among the ordinary folk of life. Yes, this Savior was for all people.

Now for we faithful folks in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, did you notice there were no restrictions to the angel's announcement? "I bring you Good News of great joy! To you/ is born/ this day/ a Savior." Period. The angel did not say, "If you keep all the laws of the Old Testament, then He'll be your Savior." No. The angel did not say, "A new Savior has come but God still has a score book." No. And certainly there was no mention of checking a list for naughty or nice. The Good News of Jesus was pure, unrestricted gift! Pure love. No strings attached! Born for you! Born for me! Born for the world.

We don't deserve Jesus. We didn't ask for Jesus. Jesus has come – to be with us now and always – in the mucky muck of our lives – God is with us. God has come to earth to love us! To forgive us! To help us find our way! To assure us that there is more to life than what we hear on the news. This Savior Jesus cherishes us and challenges us and calls us to a life of self-giving love. Jesus fills our hearts with peace that simply makes no sense. Jesus' birth is pure gift, unrestricted love. **God has come to earth to be with us in love.** That's Good News!

God with flesh and skin on, God Emmanuel, has come to hide with us under the bed. Sit at the computer with all the bills. God is in the hospital room. At our school and work and play with family. Out in creation, on our hikes and bikes. At the altar and at the grave, our Savior, Jesus Christ is with us. What a gift!

God is in the middle of our national tensions, with refugees as they flee, with those who suffer injustice, working God's ways through people each and every day. Jesus has come amid the greed of "Rome", the lies of Hollywood, occupiers and those occupied and Jesus comes amid the quest of nations to be greater than another.

How do we know that? Because there is still love on earth. The evidence is clear! People still love. We are here tonight! People still pray. We give. We work for justice. We work on behalf of the least and lost and lonely. We repent and then we laugh in the face of our sin because we trust have a Savior. Now that's great news!

*And by the way, you know, don't you, that Jesus is the ultimate re-gift. In fact, He is the original re-gifter – I think He started it. Think about it – He's been re-born and re-born and re-born every Christmas Eve since he was - well since he was born! Merry Christmas! Let's sing about it! Amen*