

December 24, 2018 Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan  
Nativity of our Lord - Christmas Eve  
Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the second chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

*<sup>1</sup>In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>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: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,*

*<sup>14</sup>“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*

*<sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

There was no place for them...

Of all the words that stand out to me as we return again to Christ’s birth story this year, I am struck by these: there was no place for them...

So many of us, of course, spend so much time during this time of the year carving out space for those things that are sacred...or are supposed to be. We make a place in our busy lives for giving, for special meals, for time away from the routines of work or study or the pursuit of a place to work or study...

Perhaps we even try to make a place for the holy one who is being born in our midst again...

And yet, when God arrives in our life and in our world...it is always at the center of the story that there was no place...

Try as we might, I'm not sure we ever could make such a place. How could we possibly make a place for the author of the universe in our small, messy, complicated little lives and world?

We tell other famous stories, too, this time of year...of characters who had no desire to make a place like that...Ebenezer Scrooge, Walter Hobbes, the Grinch who lived just north of Whoville...Hans Gruber...

The Grinch remains one of my favorites. And, of course, he learns the lesson that try as he might, he can't stop Christmas from coming. He can't steal hope or joy or singing... But sometimes I wonder if the Grinch's lesson is the one we need to learn. Maybe there are some Grinches and Scrooges among us. But I imagine more of us can identify with the Whos. Maybe especially some of the Whos in the live action remake of the classic cartoon short. The Christmas Spirit competition that seems to define the season...the rushing around. We can relate.

And I wonder if there is a lesson buried a bit beneath the surface for us...beneath the Grinch's realization that he can't do anything to stop Christmas from coming...maybe there is another epiphany. Not only is there nothing he can do to stop Christmas...there is also nothing we can do to create Christmas.

Because the first Christmas broke into this world like a thief...intruded on our way of being...The first Christmas arrived in a world that had no place for it. Christ was born in a world that had no place for him...which is, of course, precisely why we needed him so much.

This is why...politics aside...I think it's really funny when we use phrases like "Keep Christ in Christmas." Keep him in there? We started this whole thing try to keep him out! And...he doesn't need a 5 point harness now either...He's not about to fall out or anything. It is quite simply not up to us. Thanks be to God.

God chooses to bend down to earth...to live this messy, difficult life...to take on a body with all its limitation and struggle and frailty...to enter the world through the body of a human mother...to enter our blood and tears and every other bodily fluid that drenched that holy birth.

In the midst of all these Christmas lights and loveliness, it might be an uncomfortable thing to say all that out loud...It might scandalize us. And it should...it really should...so much more than it often does. Because we act like this little baby Jesus fits into our lives...in the manger scene out front or on the mantle...but he doesn't. How could he? How could God fit on our lawns or our mantles?

The Creator of the Universe...the Word that was with God hovering over the formless void before the first breath of creation...takes on mortal life...is a helpless, weak, tiny child. It is impossible and unseemly and beautiful and strange. God offers us the greatest mercy we could never have imagined...by putting himself at our mercy.

And in that we fail him, of course...to care for him as we should...then and now...We fail to welcome him. And he keeps returning to us in love.

We cannot possibly know how to make a place for God with us...for Emmanuel. I had an friendly argument with a colleague once about why we fill our worship spaces with beautiful things like gold and silver and fine linen...He thought that when we dress our altars with rich fabrics, we might come to convince ourselves that God appears there because it is so beautiful...because we've made the place worthy of the holy...

And, of course, we cannot make this world worthy.

Perhaps, though, we still dress our altars and our homes and ourselves as beautifully as we know how when we hear that the Creator of the Universe is coming close...(that is, if we resist what should probably be our first instinct – to run and hide)...but if we seek to make our world as beautiful as we know how...it is only out of a desire to honor the divine presence as best as we know how.

And God loves us so much that God shows up whether we have found a way to prepare or not...whether our altars and lives are beautiful or not...whether our hair is perfect or not...whether our families are harmonious or not...whether we are successful or not... If God would come to a feed trough in a stable...then God would come to a group of friends huddled around a card table...just as much as a shining gathering around a beautiful altar. God would even come here. God makes a place in a world that aches for God's presence but doesn't know how to make room.

This, then, is the mystery of Christmas...Christ is born into this world whether we are bright, shining and happy...or not. And if we are looking for where God will show up...we might not look so much to the bright shining places...because that is not where God reaches into our existence. God enters the full-on mess that is human suffering, oppression, injustice, and poverty at Christmas. God makes a place...and it's not the kind of place we expect...God makes a place to be near to us...because that is what God chooses...more than glory and heavenly perfection and peace. God takes humble, imperfect, discordant humanity...because God wants to be close to us more than anything. And God wants us to find ways to draw close to each other...

A friend of mine said it best this past week: "God, give me the grace to remember that we cannot create Christmas. We can only receive it." (h/t Beth Bachman Caulfield)

We can't stop it...and we can't make it happen either. Because God breaks into a world that makes no place for God...and comes close to live among us...in this Christ...born of Mary...a helpless baby...born among us again tonight.

For this mystery and this act of grace upon grace, we give thanks.

Amen.