

**St. Stephen's Episcopal Church**

**50 Bedford Road**

**Armonk, New York 10504**

**Christmas Eve (C)**

**December 24, 2021**

**DRAFT**

**“How have we come to Jesus?”**

**The Holy Gospel according to**

**Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)**

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be

registered. 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of

the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (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.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.)

By your grace, Dear Lord, may we find your way as your disciples to be favored this

and every Christmas season by your peace that passes all understanding. Amen.

My friend, a former emergency medicine doctor from California, is Jewish, and he was raised Jewish. As I wondered just how the Christmas story sounds to him, a verse came to me from the Gospel according to Luke, Chapter 16, Verse 31:

“ And Jesus said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead. ”

This is saying that even the Resurrection that we celebrate on Easter is comparable to hearing Moses and the prophets. That

sounds a bit heretical, doesn't it? But in this verse we hear both resonance and dissonance with the Christmas gospel. If Resurrection is not superior to but only equal to what was written in the Old Testament, then how important is the Incarnation? Why did Jesus have to be born on Planet Earth? Why was Jesus presence here on Planet Earth necessary? And that hits hard at the story we hear over and over during Christmas time.

My doctor friend, ever the pragmatist, said that when he was younger, he asked his mother why can't they put up a Christmas tree like all the other families around them?

He got nowhere with his inquiry, though. But he says he fantasized about putting up a tree in his living room on Christmas Eve and maybe, just maybe, Santa would get confused and come down his chimney and leave him gifts like all the other children got on Christmas.

Maybe he was dissuaded from this wild imagination by his mother who might have assured him that Jewish children get gifts at Hanukkah instead of Christmas. But his Hanukkah gifts did not seem comparable to the ones those Christian children got, even the ones who weren't even Christians, they had Christmas trees, and believed in Santa,

and all those children got presents under their tree. But my friend felt eternally deprived by not having a Christmas tree.

Turns out, the Christmas tree itself was a German ‘invention’ from the eighteenth century that happened to catch on in the rest of the world over time. In the seventeenth century, no one had Christmas trees. And I wonder if children even got presents on Christmas Day.

A brief factoid here: Every year, Americans give an average of 24 Christmas gifts per person, with a total value of \$65 billion.

<https://theweek.com/articles/441360/brief-history-christmas-present>

So how did this all get started?

How did the Christmas gift custom get started? Christians see gift giving as a symbolic homage to the Three Wise Men's tributes to the baby Jesus. In the New Testament, the Magi are described as honoring the newborn Savior with valuable gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But gift giving this time of year dates to an even older tradition. Pagans in Europe and the Middle East gave presents at several winter festivals, including Saturnalia, a raucous Roman festival in honor of Saturn, god of

agriculture, which began on December 17. During this weeklong holiday in the cold, dark dead of winter, pagans would lift their spirits by drinking to excess and giving one another gifts, such as pottery figurines, edible treats like fruit and nuts, and festive candles. Revelers greeted one another with a joyful "Io Saturnalia!" — the ancient Roman equivalent of "Merry Christmas!"

[Sometimes I think my own mother would test us a bit by stuffing our stockings with oranges and other fruit and always nuts as well, so we were always a bit wary of what Santa had really left us on Christmas Eve if

we first saw our stocking on the mantle piece.]

So, what happened to Saturnalia? Early Christian leaders phased it out. They considered it their religious duty to eradicate the existing pagan culture, but knew that dumping the beloved festival would cause a backlash. So in the 4th century, they created a rival festival to mark Jesus' birth:

Christmas. The Bible doesn't explicitly state the date on which Jesus was born, and many theologians place his birth in the spring. But church leaders pushed the date back a few months to Dec. 25 and borrowed some

Saturnalia rituals for their own festival to keep the public happy. "If Christianity moves Christmas into December, you can then fade out these other festivals," said archaeologist Sam Moorhead. "You can attempt to move on as if nothing has happened." The festival quickly spread across the Christian world, but some pious believers refused to join in the holiday cheer.

Who were these Scrooges? Our Pilgrim forefathers. Although today's commercialized Christmas is considered distinctly American, the festival was banned in the nation's earliest days. New England's

Puritan leaders considered it a pagan or papist abomination, and any citizen found celebrating around December 25 would be sternly reprimanded. But when Christmas celebrations became legal in the 1680s, [yes, before the 1680's Christmas celebrations were illegal—how's that for a downer?] when Christmas celebrations became legal in the 1680s, gift giving boomed. Rural Americans carved wooden toys and made pieces of needlework in the agricultural offseason to give to family members and neighbors. The Industrial Revolution saw those handmade items replaced with mass-manufactured trinkets and toys. By 1867, the

holiday present industry was healthy enough for Macy's in New York City to keep its doors open until midnight on Christmas Eve for the first time, only a hundred fifty-four years ago.

Did everyone get in the spirit? Not exactly. By 1904, one writer in Harper's Bazaar was already lamenting the rampant commercialism of the day. "Twenty-five years ago, Christmas was not the burden that it is now," wrote Margaret Deland. "There was less haggling and weighing, less quid pro quo, less fatigue of body, less wearing of soul; and, most of all, there was less loading up with trash." Such complaints prompted

the creation of organizations like SPUG, the Society for the Prevention of Useless Giving, whose members included Anne Morgan, the daughter of banker J.P. Morgan, and former President Theodore Roosevelt. But retailers were unabashed. The ultimate gift giver, Santa, started appearing in advertisements, and the dreaded "Christmas creep" began, with stores advertising their Christmas wares earlier each year. For toy makers and sellers, the holiday season now begins in February. February is when all toy manufacturers come together to decide what toys need to be mass produced for the next Christmas.

Remembr it is a 65 billion dollar business now.

The average American is expected to spend \$720 on gifts this year, according to the National Retail Federation.

Isn't that a bit excessive? Scroogenomics author Joel Waldfogel certainly thinks so. He's lobbied for Americans to abandon Christmas gift giving, which he calls an "orgy of wealth destruction." Waldfogel notes that one-third of holiday spending still isn't paid off two months after Christmas. Worse, most of us don't even like many of the presents we receive. The "deadweight loss" of sweaters never worn and books

never read equates to about 18 percent of Christmas spending — a staggering \$12 billion. Present buying may boost the economy, but Waldfogel argues that "if the spending we engage in doesn't produce any satisfaction, then it's hardly a measure of well-being." Worse, he contends, it goes against the very spirit of Christmas. Isn't it supposed to be the thought that counts? "The thought," he says, "doesn't need to be communicated with a lot of money."

Then there's Santa Claus--Santa: The evolution of a gift giver.

Santa Claus has undergone many transformations over the centuries. The jolly

rotund gent started out as St. Nicholas of Myra, a real-life, 4th-century Byzantine monk who handed out bags of money to the poor; [so fourth century St. Nicholas just happens to coincide with the ‘invention of Christmas’ on December 25]. St. Nicholas was introduced to the U.S. in the early 1800s, and quickly mutated into a "right jolly old elf", thanks to the 1823 poem, "A Visit From St. Nicholas," commonly known as "'Twas the Night Before Christmas" and later attributed to Clement Clarke Moore, who claimed authorship in 1837. By 1890, children could meet live "Santas" at department stores — the new name having

been taken from the Dutch version of Saint Nicholas, Sinterklaas. In the 1930s, Santa's bearded face was strewn over advertisements for Coca-Cola, solidifying his status as Yuletide's main man. These days, Santa is undergoing a new, politically correct transformation: Worried that his obesity sets the wrong impression, some greeting card companies have started to feature a leaner, healthier Santa on their Christmas cards. [Can you imagine a svelt Santa?]

So where does all this leave us, coming back to my Jewish friend and his lack of a

Christmas tree for Santa to put presents under ?

We have tried to replace the joy of the Virgin Birth with the joy of giving and getting presents. Some children, no just Jewish children, will never get presents due to dire poverty. Food is much more important than gifts.

So, why Christmas?

Best I can figure, Jesus came to gather up all of us who were not born Jewish and to assure us that we were just as special as all the Jews who had mothered or nurtured Jesus—recall that Mary was a Jew, and so was Joseph, who is always somewhere in the

background and necessary for the lineage of Jesus to extend back to the great King David, who united the northern tribes of Israel with the southern tribes to become a small but great nation.

So without Jesus and the Apostle Paul who was specifically sent to the the Gentiles like most of us, we would still be cut off from the family of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Jesus came to show us that God had not only chosen the Jews, but that God is choosing us as well, protestants, catholics, and so on. Without Jesus in the manger, we would forever be seen as second rate God

lovers, and second rate as those chosen by God.

So those Christmas trees, those more expensive than ever this year Christmas trees, are helpful reminders that we are chosen too. We are those wise men from the East. We come to adore this baby Jew, too. We give him gifts, and he gives us the gift of eternal life. We can never outgive Jesus Christ. By his birth he promised to save us. By his death he sealed the deal to save us. And by his rising again on the third day, Jesus the Christ showed us that life was more powerful than death, that God will raise God's children. We too have been

chosen, by God, through his Son Jesus  
Christ.

Come let us adore him, Jesus Christ the  
Lord.

Amen.

Description: Jesus came to join us to the chosen of God. By his life we are made equals to those from the lineage of Abraham. By his death we have been assured eternal life. The rest of Christmas tends to be a tale of great excess, likely diverting our eyes from the reality and importance of Jesus birth, death, and resurrection.

Tags: Christmas, tree, gifts, Santa, Jesus, Christ, God, chosen, Paul, history, saturnalia, Macys, spending, toys, Jews,

Mary, Joseph, wisemen, Abraham, Moses,  
prophets, eternal, life, Easter, Hanukkah

Another sermon from another year:

I receive a decree, an official notice, each year from my birth state of Tennessee that I should go there to renew the registration of the car I have there in my vacation home.

And Jan and I duly traverse afar on down to Tennessee to be registered as owners of that car. And if I had my New York car in Tennessee, I would receive a decree, or I am aware of the law, that mandates that I must come back to New York to have my car inspected in order to be able to drive it on any highway, even an out of state highway,

because my New York vehicle is registered in New York, and to maintain a legal registration of my vehicle it must have a New York inspection. As you probably know, we cannot get our New York car inspected in New Jersey or Tennessee or Connecticut or anywhere else. If we are out of state, we must travel back to our home in New York to get our car inspected here in order for our registration to be current if we have New York license plates. We have to have the mandated inspections to be sure we have good brakes, good headlights, and good integrity of our vehicles. But we are not only certifying our vehicle, we also have

to certify our residence, our address. We ourselves are being 'registered', in addition to our vehicle each time they are registered.

When I realized that fact, it became apparent to me that even twenty centuries after Joseph and Mary, that even I receive decrees or am aware of a law stating such a mandated decree, or decrees, that require that on occasion I myself, and you yourself, must return home to be registered if we had gone to another state. Also since most people still live in the state where they were born, most people simply stay in that state and go as required to register our vehicles and have them inspected. Joseph and Mary

of course didn't have to register their donkey, but in similar manner to them, we are actually registering ourselves when we are registering our vehicles—we must swear that we are residents of the state in which our vehicles are registered. We have yet to become that much more sophisticated than first century Israel and Rome, where the Emperor was the one who often issued the decrees of the Empire—that mandate wasn't entirely left to the local magistrates or governors. But the governors of each Roman province performed many of the perfunctory duties of our own US governors. Our 'emperor' that is a bit comparable to the

Roman emperor would be someone like the Environmental Protection Agency who decrees to each car manufacturer the total fleet emission limits each year, limits which save thousands of lives by reducing the amount of fine particles we are exposed to each year. The EPA however carries out its ‘decrees’ on each automobile manufacturer rather than on individual citizens. So we are not exactly in the mold of the first century, but perhaps we can identify with the demands on the Holy Couple, Joseph and Mary.

As a result of this “registration”, the Babe is born in Bethlehem, where his

earthly father's ancestors going all the way back to King David were born. So the connection to the line of David becomes a key point featured by the writer of the gospel according to Luke. Unfortunately President George Washington did not have any heirs, so the comparison is not available to us US citizens, none of us can trace our lineage back to the first President, but there are a number of families, often with the name "Dandridge" who can trace their lineage back to George Washington's spouse, Martha, whose full married name was Martha Dandridge Custis Washington.

<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~hendred/Dandridge.htm>

So we do have even in the Twenty First Century some comparable historically traceable lineages similar to those of Joseph, Mary's husband, Mary the mother of Jesus.

Then there are the shepherds in this Christmas story. Some few families in the first century were shepherds, and even today still are shepherds, and some of our descendants were shepherds and farmers and general laborers. They and we would not have famous lineages like Joseph, but common laborers are well represented in our Christmas gospel today, for to the lowly

shepherds was made the very first announcement of the Birth of the Messiah. Christ was born for all, not just for the high and mighty, descendants of King David, but down to the lowest persons on earth Christ would make God known through his Son Jesus.

The announcement was not of an ordinary variety. It was made by “an angel of the Lord”. And in the Greek it says that the glory of the Lord engulfed the shepherds—our NRSV translation says the glory of the Lord “shown around them” but perhaps “engulfed is a more accurate translation of the Greek. Can you imagine

being engulfed by the glory of the Lord?  
Some artists depict the angel as shining  
God's glory on the shepherds, but the angel  
is not the source of God's glory, only God is  
the source of his glory. And God's glory  
encompassed, engulfed, and surrounded the  
shepherds on every side. What a feeling that  
must have been. Can you imagine being  
engulfed by God's glory? But indeed, Mary  
was engulfed in a similar way by the Holy  
Spirit when she became pregnant with Jesus.  
The angel tells Mary that the Holy Spirit  
"will come upon" her and "overshadow"  
her, as Luke 1:35 says. The Greek words  
used are trying to express the inexpressible,

that God brings new physical life to lowly Mary's womb, and God brings new spiritual life to the lowly shepherds. Whether that process would be experienced as a light, as we see often in science fiction movies when the 'aliens' shine a light down on someone, or 'beam someone up', or whether it instead the sensation of God surrounding one as a loving Father—I prefer the latter picture as God is the entire expression of love. Love makes things happen. Love solves insoluble problems. Love 'conquers all' -- that ancient expression goes all the way back to the first century BC Roman poet, Virgil, who penned it in Latin: "omnia vincit

amor”. Love overshadowed the Virgin Mary, love overshadowed and surrounded the lowly shepherds “keeping watch over their flocks by night”, per Luke 2:8. Love comes upon us right here as we see again the miracle announced and hear of the miracle made flesh in Jesus our Lord.

The Child is “wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger”. Today we have the great opportunity of receiving the bread of life which represents the Babe in the manger; he who fed five thousand also feeds us still. By his body we are fed. By his body we are healed. By his body, by his sacrifice on the cross, we are made entirely

whole, ready to approach the throne of God at our end without any worry or care.

Christ came to us to show us the love that passes all understanding. Without Christ we would never know for sure what God is like. God made the stars; but God also presided over the miracle that made us. God made life. And even though the life God made deviated from God's plan because of the influence of Evil, God still has provided us a way to straighten out our lives, to make our way to God direct and unhindered at our last day. By Christ's love for us we know for sure that God is love itself, far above us, far beyond us, yet Christ is as close as the wafer

we will hold in our hands this evening and the cup we will drink.

God sent Jesus to tell us that flesh is not evil, that flesh is not bad, and to give us a way through belief in him that frees us from worry about our own end. We will always be with God through God's Son Jesus Christ. We will never be left alone. Christ shows us the Way, the Truth, and the Life Everlasting. Those shepherds were told by the angel, those shepherds were emboldened by the praise of the multitude of the heavenly host. And they would confirm all they had been told by journeying to Bethlehem to see what had been told them

about the promised miraculous Child lying in the manger.

How can we follow what the angels were doing in our own lives, and should we? The angels praised God and were saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” Some have asked why go to church, why not just worship God by working to earn money and/or to teach others some trade or a marketing tool?

<http://storylineblog.com/2014/02/03/i-dont-worship-god-by-singing-i-connect-with-him-elsewhere/>

Indeed, the angels were singing to shepherds who could not worship God on a Sabbath or a Sunday, and as such, shepherds were the outcasts of the Jewish religion. But the angels came to these outcasts to encourage them, to let them hear praises to God, and to hear that God was bringing peace, not to the world, but peace to those whom God favored. And it seems obvious that those shepherds were being very favored: who else has had a host of angels coming to them and praising God? Worship is indeed commended in all aspects of the New Testament; the disciples met together on the Sunday after Christ had been crucified,

fearful that those who had murdered their Master might try to do the same to them, which eventually indeed turned out to be the case. And for every Sunday thereafter the followers of Christ met together once a week on Sundays. That Christians were meeting in synagogues on the day after the Sabbath is the underpinning of the concern of John's Gospel written in the ninth decade of the first century when the Jewish leaders began to agitate the non-Messiah followers to exclude Christians from synagogues, finally leading to Christian meetings in all sorts of places, but still Christians met together. The prime charge of Jesus to his

disciples in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 was to “make disciples”. Here is where we Christians have historically been too lax. We focus on baptizing and teaching, but making disciples becomes forgotten. When we focus on worship with no place weekly to express our discipleship, we become impoverished in our faith. Gathering together weekly to do discipling, leading others to find Christ, is a rare phenomenon in the contemporary church. We would much rather publish our Sunday service schedule than publish our weekly discipleship schedule. In fact, on no church bulletin board I have ever seen has a

notice of where that church is discipling that week. No wonder so many refuse to come to church when all they have left after they leave here is to plan to come back next Sunday. As a result we Christians have become more of a club than a group of disciples teaching others how to become disciples. Lord help us. May at least some here resolve to become disciple makers this coming week and this coming year. Then maybe we too will encounter the praising of angels out in our fields of work.

May our Merry Christmas this year be fulfilled by actually making disciples from now on.

Amen.

Description: The registration in the first century is the background of how the Savior was born in Bethlehem, which translates as “The house of bread”. The Bread of Life, Jesus Christ was born to give us eternal salvation by indwelling in Christ, even eating his precious body in our Eucharist. As the birth of Jesus is narrated, angels praise God, shepherds come to adore him, and on Epiphany the wise men come to give him gifts. The humble scene is transformed into a glorious celebration that is retold every Christmas by Christians worldwide.

Tabs: Jesus, Christ, shepherds, love, angels,  
Bethlehem, Virgin, Mary, Joseph, baby,  
child, peace, love, glory

**St. Stephen's Episcopal ProCathedral**

**35 S. Franklin Street**

**Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania 18701**

**Christmas Eve**

**December 24, 2014**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish**

**DRAFT**

**“Great Joy!”**

**The Holy Gospel according to**

**Luke 2:1-20**

By your grace, Dear Lord, may we be  
favored this and every Christmas season by

your peace that passes all understanding.

Amen.

Commentators have recently noted that during this season, even atheists take a breather and find some joy in the Holy Days leading up to and from the birth of Christ. At least a bit of Christmas cheer is in the air for everyone, although in some places it is mixed with a bit of snow and ice, whereas in other locations, the warm sands of the southern hemisphere beaches are the treat to revelers during this holy season. One of our Australian friends who lived for a long time in England and then re-immigrated back to

Australia commented to us, “If my mother gives another beach party for Christmas I think I’ll choke!” We in the northern climes here suffer from too short and too dark days that are often too cold to enjoy much at least outdoors. But the alternative would seem surreal to us, as it surely would also to Australians!

Last Advent we were on the Big Island of Hawaii, where the incessant Christmas carols beamed over every shopping center, and big round polystyrene Santas are everywhere. I doubt many of the homebred folk there have ever experienced snow!

Timing is very important for all the holidays—we in the Northern Hemisphere here wouldn't want to celebrate Christmas during July, no matter how few of us may love the snow. It would be difficult to shout Happy New Year in March, and so on. Yet we Episcopalians do celebrate the spiritual New Year at least a bit at the first of December or at the end of November when Advent begins. But the timing of things in our lives makes a major difference, and most of the time we have no control or almost no control of it. Take the historical record, for example:

>>Christopher Columbus, feeling a bit discouraged one day, walked by a Spanish monastery. He was thirsty, so he went in for a drink of water. An old monk sat with him and listened to how he wanted to go on an expedition to find another land. Bad timing? When the story was over, Christopher Columbus went on his way, but the old monk was a personal friend of Queen Isabella, and he was the one who convinced her to finance Columbus' expedition to the New World. Europe's discovery of America started with a drink of water in a monastery.

>>A young Abraham Lincoln was out in the back of his father's store one day,

rummaging through an old barrel. He reached down and felt a couple of books in his hand. He pulled them up and saw they were the historic Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England. Something happened to Abraham Lincoln as he read those. He decided to become a lawyer, and it totally changed his direction. He got into politics and became the President of the United States and healer of the wounds of the Civil War. But it all started with Abe rummaging in a barrel.

>>John Calvin was going down to Italy. War broke out and the road he was going to take was blockaded, so he went to Geneva

instead. Bad timing? His time in Geneva made a change in his life that has changed many lives ever since as he became a leader in the Protestant Reformation.

>>George Whitfield was a bartender in England and couldn't get along with his sister-in-law, who owned the bar, so he left. Bad timing? Out of that experience he turned to God, went to Oxford, became part of the Holy Club with John Wesley and helped change England by his ardent evangelism.

>>What I'm saying is this: God's timing is perfect and purposeful.

[Thanks to Dr. Dwight Gunter, *Preacher's Magazine*, 2007, for these wonderful illustrations and ideas:

<http://www.nph.com/nphweb/html/pmol/webdec09.htm>]

God in God's good time decided that the birth of God's only Son would be on Christmas Day, although in fact, we moderns have no clue as to the actual date of Christ's birth—December 25 was just sort of 'adopted' in the early fourth century, although St. Hippolytus in the early third century actually seems to have 'started the ball rolling' by musing that a perfect person should be conceived on the day of his death

and thus be born nine months later. The time of Passover and Easter had been more or less set in late March, so nine months later would be late December, which also happened to coincide with a few pagan celebrations trying to ‘restore’ the sun as earth came to its shortest day in the Northern Hemisphere. Christmas celebrations of course could have been far different had the first century cradle of civilization been in Australia or China!

We ‘liturgical folk’ begin Christmas celebration tonight, on Christmas Eve, when the rest of the world has already gone Christmas bonkers from Thanksgiving or

Halloween onwards. But for us catholic folk, the next days *ARE* the Christmas Season, leading to and ending on the Day of Epiphany, January 6. Yet in a few hours I shall, God willing, fly southward to the Southern Baptist valleys of Tennessee, where I defy you to find more than a handful of crèches and Santa and Rudolph scenes still lit for more than a day or two from now. The non-liturgical world is really ‘Christ-mass-ed out’ by December 25, although for us Episcopalians, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and other liturgical denominations, the sales post-Christmas are great for us as we are still able to give

Christmas gifts (purchased at discounted prices!) and enjoy Christmas for twelve more days!

The first and greatest Christmas joy was announced by the angel to the shepherds of Bethlehem: the angel said to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” And if that was not enough to raise the hairs on the back of their necks, suddenly with this one angel standing before them, a whole multitude of the heavenly host appeared, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

I have recently seen one artist’s imaginary picture of this event which was so striking.

In this picture the whole sky was filled and

lit up with angels praising and giving glory

to God. And I thought to myself, why

would anyone need a star to find their way

to Bethlehem when such a profound set of

angel lights in the sky had happened?!

Maybe it was just the angels coming and

going into and out of our universe that the

Wise Men saw.

But it was not just ‘joy’ that the angel

announced to the shepherds; the angel

announced “news of great joy”, and this ‘great joy’ is not the exclusive right of the shepherds, but, this great joy is [quote,] “for all the people”; this great joy is not even limited to those who have God’s favor, as the Son of God was sent to all of the world to save them and us from eternal damnation and punishment, and to offer us instead eternal life, as John 3:16 says: “For God so loved the world that God sent God’s only son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Yet, are we, on our own, able to believe anything of a spiritual nature? This greatly worries some, that the Christmas story just sounds too

fantastic, just too good or too unbelievable. But it not for us on our own to have this belief, it is for God's grace to give us this belief in God's Son. Belief is not something we can muster by ourselves. Belief is God-given, and only God-given. To imply we can do anything to gain God's favor is folly; we are able to please God only and because God has given us the grace to do so. ...Now doesn't that sound a bit arbitrary? Suppose you can't believe that Christ arose from his three day grave, does that make you a lost doubter? Does that take away from you the present that God just handed the shepherds, the wonderful present of 'great joy'? No,

God can give anything to anyone, and to prove that, God did give his Son to all of us that first Christmas. God's Son is not an exclusive gift; God's Son is a universal gift, but it is our God-given faith that allows us to accept this great gift.

I pray that this Christmas season will enliven the faith that God has given you; I pray that you will be enkindled to do great things for God in your lifetime, that you will give your all in following the one and only Messiah of the whole world.

I am thankful that we do celebrate the Birth of Our Lord every year, as a birthday party of epic worldwide proportions. We

may have missed the great joy in the malls or in opening our presents or in what Santa has or has not brought for us. We may be missing our dear friends who have gone before us this year, and that may cause us a profound sadness due to that loss. But the Good News is that one day we will see them again because we have the incomparable joy, the “great joy”, of knowing Jesus Christ as our Lord and their Lord. Jesus came to reconcile the living with the dead, to reconcile sinners with God, to bridge the way between heaven and earth. Tonight may you experience at least a small bit of that joy, that great joy that God sent to us in

the form of a tiny baby, “wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” Jesus was meant for you; Jesus is the Real Gift under the Christmas tree, even if you don’t have a Christmas tree. God’s gift is the gift that really never stops giving us joy, great joy, which is for all people.

Come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.  
Amen.