



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Christmas Eve

December 24, 2016

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### **“No Moderate Response to This”**

*(Luke 2:15-18)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us. And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them’” (Lk. 2:15-18).*

**Collect of the Day:** Almighty God, grant that the birth of Your only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free from the bondage of sin; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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He was not born in a palace, but in a stable. He was not born into a comfortable home and placed into a clean, soft crib, but rather a dusty, crusty feed trough. He was not surrounded by heads of state, but by shepherds. He was not born to a middle class or wealthy family, but to a poor family. He was born to a pregnant, unwed teenage peasant, who in that culture would have been stigmatized for the rest of her life and so would her son.

Jesus had none of the marks that we usually associate with greatness. Imagine, the most important person in the world was submerged into obscurity. In that humble manger, you had the greatest king ever. In that weakness you had the greatest strength possible. In that quietness you had the greatest grace imaginable. GLORY was going on in that manger, and nobody saw it! Nobody anticipated it! Paul wrote, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are” (1 Cor. 1:27).

Jesus had none of the markers that our world cares about. Isaiah prophesied it this way: “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. [In fact,] he was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Is. 53:2-3). But the claim of Scripture is that he is “God with us.” He’s the “GodMan” as the early church called him. The enfleshment of God. And here’s the rub: If Jesus really is God, you cannot just like him.

In his book, “Basic Christianity” John Stott says there

are three possible responses to Jesus. Just three. 1.) You either hate him and wish him dead for claiming to be God. 2.) Or you think of him as a sort of spiritual freak, a fringe character with crazed eyes and wild hair, and so you try to put as much space between you and him as possible. 3.) Or you fall down and worship him and let him be your Savior and change your life. But you cannot just like him.

When you read the New Testament, you'll see that nobody who ever met Jesus ever had a moderate reaction to him. They either hated him, ignored him or followed him. But nobody just liked him. And truth is, Jesus doesn't want to be liked. He didn't come to be liked.

In Revelation 3 Jesus said of his followers in Laodicea, "I know you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish you were one or the other. But because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spew you out of my mouth!" (v. 16). You know what it means to spew? It means here to barf. God can stomach the worst of sinners and the most pious of saints, but what he cannot stomach is people who just like him. Either hot or cold, but not lukewarm. Love him or hate him, but don't you dare just like him.

In college I was part of the UW marching band. Mike Leckrone, the director, is an institution there. He's been directing that band for 47 years, and he's still at it, still screaming at the band today the way he screamed at us thirty years ago. He demands high energy, and precision, and a certain snap to everything, and when he doesn't get that . . . when we gave him something less, usually he would rant. My brother Andy who was also in the band likes to say when on a rant his voice sounds like a buzz saw going through aluminum siding. But sometimes Leckrone would take on a soothing voice, and say, "That was nice. That was special. Thank you for that. I liked that." We hated it when he spoke like that and would collectively shout back "Noooooo! We don't want to be nice!" Eventually Leckrone would revert back to ranting, "One more time . . . this time with enthusiasm!"

God doesn't want to be liked. God doesn't want nice. He didn't go through the trouble in Bethlehem or Golgatha just to cause a little ripple in your life. Hate him or love him but don't just like him. Because who he is and what he has claimed demands a stronger response. The claim is God was born in the flesh. If it's true, it's the biggest news ever. If it's true, it must mean there's something really wrong with us. It must mean we were in a deep dark mess from which we could not dig ourselves out. It must mean that sin, death and the devil had us dead to rights unless God did something about it. So there is certainly nothing lukewarm about his attitude toward us. In fact, it must mean he loves us. Any God who would be born for us and die on a cross for us must really love us.

Christmas also means he understands us. That's unique. No other religion in the world can say that the way Christmas says that. Let me explain.

As many of you know my wife has metastatic breast cancer, which means cancer that has travelled to other organs in the body. She's been contending with this for years. Gail recently volunteered again to lead a four day support group for other women with metastatic breast cancer. At their initial meeting, the first thing her group always wants to know is does she really understand what they're going through? Does she understand what it feels like to have all those tests and surgeries and chemo and radiation? Does she understand the nasty side effects: the nausea, the fatigue and neuropathy and hair loss? Does she understand the anxiety? Does she understand the struggle of trying to maintain a career through all this, as well as a marriage and a family? Yes, Gail understands. She knows firsthand, and among those women in the group, that gives her "street cred." She's been there, and is there. She's one of them.

Jesus understands. Because of Christmas he's one of us now. And he knows firsthand what it's like to be vulnerable, for instance, vulnerable as a newborn baby. Jesus knows firsthand what it's like to be ignored, mocked, and scorned. God knows firsthand what it's like to have

someone love you and then reject and hate you. He knows what it's like to be targeted, hunted, falsely accused, misunderstood, deliberately misquoted and unjustly prosecuted. He knows firsthand what it feels like to be beaten up, derided, spat at, shouted at, even crucified. He knows firsthand what death feels like as it approaches. No other religion in the world can say this. But Jesus understands. Jesus, God's Son is one of us. He's your brother.

Because God is loving and powerful, why he tolerates sickness and suffering is hard for us to understand. But the incarnation means that nevertheless God had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine. He himself has gone through the whole gamut of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life, to the grind of hard work, to the worst horror of pain and humiliation and despair and death. And here's the thing: he suffered all this for us (!), and thought it well worth his while. So much he loves us!

Why all the weakness . . . weakness in the manger, weakness on the cross? Why didn't God just flex his muscles and wipe evil off of the face of the earth. Think about that. The source of evil in the world is right here, right in your heart and mine. If Jesus came to destroy evil with his power, how many of us would be left standing? Not one.

Instead, Jesus came in weakness not to destroy evil doers, but to save us. He was born in weakness and he died that way too. He died taking the punishment we deserved. He died to win for us the forgiveness we so desperately need if we are to enter into heaven. This forgiveness comes as a gift, a gift of his grace. It cannot be earned. Faith receives it as a gift.

Some gifts are hard to receive. They make you swallow your pride. In our family, we give a lot of books for Christmas, but you have to choose them carefully. If Gail gave me a dieting book, and my kids gave me the book, "How to Win Friends and Influence People", the message I would take is that I'm fat and obnoxious.

Some gifts are hard to receive. If you're in a financial pinch and someone comes along and offers you an incredibly generous financial gift to help you get on your feet again, it might be difficult for you to accept that gift. Your pride might get in the way and force you to turn it down. To accept it is to admit, "I'm not as smart or strong or self-sufficient as I thought I was."

There has never been a gift that has made you swallow your pride quite like the gift of Jesus Christ given to the world at Christmas. If God has to go through all this trouble to be born as a man, to suffer and die on a cross, it must mean you were in really bad shape. It must mean that you are not able to save yourself. It must mean you cannot pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, not out of this trouble. It must mean you are not as strong or as good or as resourceful or as independent as you thought you were.

But don't let pride get in the way of this gift. That would be the greatest mistake you could ever make. Don't let anything or anyone get in the way of this gift. He is more important to you than anything else in your life. Why? Because he wasn't just born for you. He also died for you, to forgive you of everything, to cleanse you from all of it. And he gives you forgiveness and salvation as a gift of his grace.

Love like that demands a real response. You can't just like him for that. You can just say, "Wasn't that nice? Isn't he special?"

My invitation to you this night is that you spend the rest of your days thanking him, praising him, serving him, and obeying him. Amen.



