



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2017

“The Outlandish Ways of God’s Grace”

(Luke 2:7)

Rev. David K. Groth

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: O God, You make us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Grant that as we joyfully receive Him as our Redeemer, we may with sure confidence behold Him when He comes to be our Judge; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

We've heard the account of Jesus' birth so many times that it hardly startles us anymore. A young woman becomes pregnant, but she is unwed. She insists the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, but of course her neighbors find that claim to be rather dubious. Just when it's about time to give birth, Caesar Augustus crooks his finger and issues a decree that compels Joseph and Mary (along with the rest of the Roman world) to return to the town of their ancestors for a proper census. For Joseph and Mary, Bethlehem is about 80 miles away, so a four or five day journey. Tradition has it she rode on a donkey, but we don't know that, and anyway, riding on a donkey for 80 miles would be no picnic. They probably sleep on the side of the road. Once they arrive, there are no rooms to be rented, but they're free to use the cattle stall out back if they wish. And so Mary gives birth in the atmosphere of hay and cattle and mice droppings and sick, wheezing barnyard cats and dust and dung. The circumstances surrounding this birth are outrageous, particularly for this infant. Has God lost his mind? And yet, rarely does God do anything in conventional, predictable ways, especially when he's doing something good for us, something gracious.

Consider how it was for Abraham and Sarah. You remember their story. Sarah's in her nineties, and feels every bit of it. Her shoulders are thin, her spinal column curved, her knuckles and knees sore with arthritis, her face latticed with the lines of her years. So when she overhears the Lord informing Abraham that she, Sara, is going to have a baby, and that they'll be the parents of a great nation, she laughs. She can't help herself. She's been barren all her life,

and now this . . . giving birth in the geriatric ward? She laughs at the absurdity of it all. She laughs because she and Abraham haven't been intimate for years. She laughs because the Lord seems to believe it will happen, and expects them to believe it too. Has God lost his mind? But God keeps his promises, and indeed, Sarah gives birth to a son, and God tells them to name that boy "Isaac", which literally means laughter. And part of what was funny about the whole thing was the outlandish way in which God brought about this grace. Of all people, why them? I suppose that could be asked of just about all the patriarchs and prophets.

Who could have predicted that God would not choose Esau, honest and reliable, a little dim, but hardworking. Instead, God chose Jacob, a con artist and a fraud whom you wouldn't trust any further than you could throw him.

Who could have predicted that God would choose a man like Noah, who every now and then liked to drown his troubles, or Moses, who was trying to lay low for braining a guy in Egypt. Or the prophets, who were a ragged lot, a little unhinged, and each one dragging their feet when God called them preach his Word. Jonah for instance, who when told to preach in Ninevah bought a one way ticket on a boat going in the other direction, because he'd just as soon see the Ninevites fry rather than repent and be saved.

Who could have foreseen that one of the ancestors of Jesus would actually be a Canaanite whore named Rahab? How she got into the royal line is anybody's guess. And why didn't Matthew think to white out that embarrassment in his genealogy of Jesus? What was he thinking? What was God thinking?

God's ways are not our ways, neither are his thoughts our thoughts . . . especially when it comes to grace. Of all the peoples he could have chosen to be his own, why on earth did he choose the Jews, who as somebody said, were just like everybody else only more so. More faithful and more idolatrous, more courageous and more cowardly, more forgiven and more punished, more brilliant and more

brainless than anyone else in the world. You just know there's trouble ahead when God says to them, "I will be your God and you shall be my people" (Ex. 6:7). No sooner is the promise made than the people are dancing around a golden calf and every other ancient fertility god they could find. And yet, see how God stayed with those people through thick and thin, because he said he would.

It's a comedy of grace coursing through the Old Testament. So when the big day comes for God's Son to be born, you just know it's not going to happen in the usual way because that's not God's way of doing grace.

Sure enough, the King of kings and Lord of lords would not be born in Rome or Jerusalem, or in a palace. He would not be placed in a clean, soft, royal crib with a colorful mobile hanging above it. No, a rickety lean-to in somebody's back yard will suffice, and the royal crib shall be a feed box, and the only things hanging over that crib will be broken spider webs. And the news shall be shared first with shepherds who smelled funny and had the reputation for being crooked and were notorious for their poor synagogue attendance. And yet for them, God lights up the sky with a multitude of the heavenly hosts singing their great hymn. Somehow, all this is consistent with God's historic and outrageous ways of doing grace.

When he grew up and started preaching and teaching and sounding like the Messiah, he surrounded himself with twelve disciples, but they were no Rhodes scholars. They were just like everyone else, only more so. He criss-crossed the countryside of Galilee and galvanized thousands with his miracles—touching those with leprosy, casting out demons, raising the dead. He spoke using parables many could not understand, and of those who did understand, many of them didn't like the parables, because they saw themselves in them and didn't like what they saw. Many walked away. Others conspired to kill him. But of that crowd who followed and listened, they were generally a little rough around the edges, cultural misfits, a motley crew of tax collectors and whores and other poor, miserable sinners.

Most of the upper crust wouldn't be caught dead rubbing elbows with that element, but he was not ashamed to be with them, nor to be called "Friend of Sinners." He seemed to prefer the sinners over the righteous.

He started talking about his death, and that it would not be of the usual sort, where loved ones mop your forehead and fluff up your pillows and moisten your lips with a little sponge on a stick. Again, way too conventional. No, it would have to be a different sort for God's Son, especially if he is going to do something about that problem of our sin. It would have to be extreme . . . something like a crucifixion might suffice. When Jesus told his disciples that's how it would be, Peter thought he had lost his mind. That's the way God's grace often appears to people.

The authorities charge him with being an enemy of the state, but the only enemies he has are sin, death and the devil, and the only revolution he's aiming to ignite is the one for the human heart, and the only bias he has is for all nations. But they didn't see it that way. So God's Son, holy, gentle and good, is stripped down and spat at and mocked and flogged to within an inch or two of his life, and then finally, crucified. Who could have predicted it? (Isaiah did, as well as a number of other prophets, but nobody much listened to them.) And so, no one was quite prepared for a Savior like Jesus.

We were prepared for a king who would take hold of all power and authority and rule over his enemies, without ever letting go. We were not prepared for a God who would empty himself, humble himself, and become obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

We were prepared for a god who would take delight in meeting out justice on the wicked, especially those Romans and Canaanites, those North Koreans and Iranians . . . not for a God who rejoices with all heaven over one sinner who repents.

We were prepared for a god who strikes hard bargains, not for a God who gives as much for an hour's work as for a day's.

We were prepared for a god who would frown on us and all the pleasures of this earthly life, not for a God who would turn about 150 gallons of water into wine.

We were prepared for a king who would invite to the wedding feast of his Son only a short and exclusive list of guests, not for a King who sends his servants out to the street corners to invite anyone they could find, but the good and the bad, so that the wedding hall is filled with guests.

We were prepared for a god to whom we make commitments and promises to straighten up and fly right, not for a God who comes down and makes commitments and promises to us, even when we're no bigger or wiser than infants.

We were prepared for a god who would demand we remember what he did for us, and give a couple of symbols to jog our memories. We were not prepared for a God who feeds us with his very flesh and blood, in, with and under the bread and wine for our forgiveness.

We were prepared for some other god; we were not prepared for Jesus.

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” That sounds like God’s MO, like doing something good for us again. That sounds like the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That sounds like Jesus, your God and mine. Amen.

