

## **Sermon for Christmas Eve**

**December 24, 2021**

**Solemn Mass**

**by the Reverend James Ross Smith**

*Isaiah 9:2–4, 6–7; Psalm 96:1–4, 11–12; Titus 2:11–14;  
Luke 2:1–20*

*Note: in preparation for writing this sermon, I read the relevant sections of Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III's commentary, The Gospel of Luke (New Cambridge Bible Commentary) (Cambridge University Press, 2018). My exposition is shaped in part by their exegesis.*

It was warm last Thursday, unseasonably so, as I walked home from the East Side. I was not alone. The sidewalks were crowded. I crossed Park Avenue, walked south for a bit, and then headed west toward Madison Avenue. I noticed that many of my fellow New Yorkers had been shopping. They were carrying those distinctive bags, small and exquisitely tasteful, used by exclusive boutiques. As I walked west, the shopping bags changed a bit—more department stores, the maroon bag of a popular doll store, and the flashy bags from stores that sell expensive athletic shoes or the latest phone equipment. As I headed home, I suddenly realized that at the bottom of each one of those bags there was something precious. And to me there was something poignant about that, because

linked to each precious object, there was a story about a gift and a giver and the person who will open the box on Christmas morning. And if it were possible for us to hear those stories, I thought, they would tell us about everything that is human: about desire, need, passion, connection, obsession, hope, competition, ego, excitement, hope, concern, disappointment, pursuit, and love—all of it profoundly human and uniquely personal. It's true, of course, sometimes an expensive watch is just a watch, but a gift is hardly ever just a gift. It is almost always a symbol, of something more deeply felt and powerfully desired, though we can't always put our desires into words. We often forget that the gift—the watch or the ring or the sneakers—is a blessing that points to the One who is the source of every blessing.

We've come here this evening to read and hear a story that is precious to us. It is a story so important that Christians are not content to tell it with words alone. They tell this story in song, paint, and stained glass, in poetry and drama, in the ornaments hanging from that tree, and the crèche in the chapel, each in their own way giving us an interpretation of the Christmas story, “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirin'ius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city” (Luke 2:1–3).

What a great beginning this is: so grand, so sweeping. Here are emperors, governors, royal decrees, whole populations on the move, and then, suddenly, all the grandeur disappears, and there is just a man and a woman, compelled to travel, inconveniently it turns out, because the woman is pregnant. The reason why Joseph and Mary must travel to Bethlehem is something about which the historians argue, but within the story itself, the reason why is less important than the where. They are headed to Bethlehem, the City of David, the City of Judah's chosen king. But one of the most powerful things about this story is that everything royal, grand, and powerful within it is hidden just below the surface. There is no palace, no fine bed, no doulas or nurses. The housing arrangements have fallen through, and Mary's labor has begun. Things get urgent. The couple has been given a measure of privacy in a stable; and when their child is born, there is no cradle, there is only a manger, a trough for feeding animals, an unlovely detail, though perhaps an important one.

And then, suddenly, the scene shifts. Still no kings, no royal heralds to announce the child's birth. But there *are* shepherds, a highly symbolic vocation in the Bible. Moses and David were shepherds. In Psalm 23, the shepherd is a particularly potent and enduring symbol. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Shepherds are vigilant

watchmen, attentive, faithful defenders of the helpless and the lost. But they are not grand or powerful or, in worldly terms, particularly important. But they *are* important in this story. It is the shepherds who first receive the Good News. It is the shepherds who experience the Divine Presence, something more precious than gold, more valuable than any shiny object. And it is the shepherds who share the good news, traveling to Bethlehem, linking the vision of the Divine Presence, God in the highest heaven, with this weak, helpless, and utterly vulnerable child.

The angel tells the shepherds that the child in the manger will be for them a *semeion*, a sign, a symbol that points to something else, something profound and beautiful. This does not mean that the stable is really a palace, or the manger really a throne. No, it is exactly here, in a rustic refuge, with animals, not with princes, that the treasure, the pearl of great price is to be found. In this story, the shepherds proclaim the good news: the Son of David, the Savior, the one who is Christ the Lord, *is* Mary's son.

This scene has been painted many times and almost always the Child is shown surrounded by a warm and lovely light, which makes sense, of course. The story links the glory of God with the child in the manger, and the artists do their best to tell us that. But the text itself

does not make things that obvious. Mary, like the rest of us, hears the Good News, but she must take it in, perhaps first as a puzzle to be solved, but then as something else, something pondered deep in her heart, a gift powerful enough to change her life and ours.

Tomorrow morning, on Christmas Day, Saint John makes explicit what Saint Luke shows us but does not say: there is Life in this child and this Life is so powerful that it seems to us like Light. That is the shepherds' task: to tell us that there is glory in the highest heaven and there is also glory lying in the manger. God fed Israel in the wilderness. One day, the Son of God, now asleep in a trough, will feed us with his own flesh, the gift of Life.

W.H. Auden, the British, and Anglican, poet who made New York his home, writes in his *Christmas Oratorio*, “Remembering the stable where for once in our lives/Everything became a You and nothing was an It.” That, I think, is not a bad summary of today’s gospel. The watch and the handbag, the doll and the sneakers are lovely, but they will always remain an It. They can never be a You. But they do become gifts when they help us to look up and really see the You who is the Giver and when they teach us to look further still to the One who is the Giver of life and of all good things.

Saint Luke's Christmas story does many things and has many purposes. But, for me this year the story of Jesus' birth is a story meant to heal. We live in a jagged, ragged time. We can't predict the future and our present is filled with uncertainty and powerful and contradictory emotions: among them, resentment, anger, disappointment, and fear. And into a world where we are inclined to clutch at idols, the angels come and say, "Fear not." Don't give up, go to the Bethlehem of your heart. You are not an It. Look to your brother and sister. *They* are not an It. They are a Thou, a You.<sup>1</sup> Look to the child in the manger and see Life itself just under the surface, see there the power of the mustard seed (Mark 4:31). See the Savior in the Child, the One who will forgive, and seek, and find, and call and challenge, and heal, and ask, "Why were you afraid?" (Mark 4:40). See the One who will feed us today. See the One who promises to be with us always, even to the end of the ages (Matthew 28:20).

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1923)