

Luke 2:1-14

Christmas Eve 2023

I'm not sure how I feel about the Little Drummer Boy. It's a cute song, it sounds nice, Pentatonix does a great job with it, Justin Bieber, not so much. But whenever that song comes on, there seems to be that one person who always says, "you know that didn't actually happen, right?" Full disclosure, I am that person. And that's correct- it's Christmas fiction that makes us feel all warm and gooey on the inside, and you can tell its fiction because drummer boys typically aren't out wandering the streets of Bethlehem at night, oxen and lambs don't keep time well, and most mothers would not appreciate a snare drum being played while their newborn baby is sleeping. I wonder, however, if we've done that to the real Christmas. Have we turned Christmas into warm, gooey fiction? We hear songs and see pictures and even listen to sermons that give us the impression that the night Jesus was born all the animals in the barn behaved themselves and Jesus never cried and everything was soft, cozy, and comfortable.

Tonight, I'd like to discuss with you the real, biblical Christmas. Because the real Christmas doesn't begin with "once upon a time," or "a long time ago." Luke actually gives us a very specific time and place: about 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, Israel- a real place that's still around today- at that time it was a part of the Roman Empire. Who was in charge of the Roman Empire at that time? Caesar Augustus. What did he do? He issued a decree and wanted to take a census so he could know how many people he was ruling over. Which census was it? The first one that took place while Quirenius was governing Syria up north. What happened? Everyone, including Joseph of Nazareth went down south to Bethlehem near Jerusalem. Why? Because that's where his family was originally from. Does that sound like a legend to you? Does that sound like a made up story? Luke doesn't think so. He's writing history- Caesar, Quirenius, Joseph, Mary, the Angels, the shepherds, and Jesus are not characters in a beautiful story- they were real and Luke is showing how God used each of them to enter human history. And it was not silent, peaceful, warm, or cute. In fact, it was terrifying. That's the theme today: **The Real Christmas was Terrifying: 1. Terrifying for Mary and Joseph, 2. Terrifying for the shepherds, and 3. Terrifying for us.**

1. Terrifying for Mary and Joseph. We didn't read this today, but perhaps you remember. When the angel Gabriel first appeared to Mary and Joseph, separate times, what was the first thing he said to each of them? "Don't be afraid." Why would they be afraid? Because their next year, and really, years, would be terrifying. Consider this: an angel of God comes and tells you, a young woman from a small town that you are going to become pregnant and give birth to the King who will save all of his people, including you, and your husband who isn't your husband yet is going to raise him with you. I think that would be a bit intimidating. Add to that the fact Mary and Joseph, look closely at the text, were not married when Mary became pregnant, or when she gave birth, and everyone knew it. In that culture, they would be endlessly shamed for the rest of their

lives- in fact, premarital sex was punishable by death. No one would truly respect either of them, or their children, even though Mary did nothing wrong, who would believe her when she said, “No, God gave me this baby. I’m still a virgin.”. That’s terrifying. Add that to the fact that now, Joseph has to take his pregnant not-yet-wife up and down the mountainous Israeli wilderness to go to Bethlehem or else he’ll be punished by the government. Add to that when they get to Bethlehem, they have nowhere to stay, and it’s possible that they were able to stay with one of their relatives, but not in the actual house. In the barn, or their version of it. And there, Mary, without any modern medicine or painkillers, with a man she barely knows at her side, gives birth to a son. Moms, is there anything peaceful, silent, comfortable, or pleasant about pushing a screaming infant out of your body? It’s terrifying! And afterward, even if everything goes well, they have to return to Nazareth with their shamed, impoverished family, likely shunned by their own families, and have to raise a son who really doesn’t belong to them- they belong to him because he’s the Lord of Heaven and Earth in the flesh. That’s terrifying.

2. It was terrifying for the shepherds as well. It seems like in every nativity picture I see, the shepherds look like they’re twelve years old with curly hair and peach fuzz on their faces. That’s probably not how they looked. They’d likely be more comparable to the cowboys and wranglers of the wild west. These were not soft, gentle men. Their job was to protect sheep from predators in an age where firearms had not been invented yet and in an area where mountain lions, bears, wolves would have been common. They had likely all, quite literally, looked death in the face while saving their sheep from predators. They had that job because nothing, not even hungry mountain lions, scared them. Yet, when they saw the angel and the blinding glory of God shining around them, they melted in sheer, pure, existential terror that made them wish they were dead- a common theme in the Bible- whenever people have an encounter with the Divine, their reaction is always terror and fear- all the way back to Adam and Eve when they fell into sin- they heard God walking in the garden and they hid.

And the angels, terrifying as they were, tell the shepherds that someone even more glorious and terrifying, the one that they, the angels, hide their faces before because he is so holy and glorious that they can’t even look at him, has been born as a human being- he’s Christ, the LORD- the God of the Old Testament born as a baby in Bethlehem- which brings me to my next point.

3. Christmas should terrify us. Do you know what Christmas means? That baby in the manger is not just a cute baby that we sing songs to. He’s not just an icon that we put on posters. If the angels were correct, and I’m under the impression that they were, Jesus is nothing else but the God of Heaven and Earth, the creator of all things- you and me included, and the knower of all things who is all-powerful and in all places. And if that is true, if Jesus is really the King of all creation and the Savior and the LORD God of heaven and earth. If what the angels say about Jesus is correct, that means he is not someone you invite into your life as an advisor with solid tips or comfort when you want it. He is not a helper who gives you what you need when you need it and stays out of your way when you don’t need him. He is not a nice guy who just wants

you to be happy. He is our king, and we owe him everything. How do the words of the angels apply to you tonight? I want you to think about this. What I am going say next, I say not to shame you, but because your pastor loves you enough to tell you things that hurt. If what the angels say about Jesus is true, and you are a confirmed member of this congregation, and therefore have pledged yourself to him, and this Christmas Eve is the first time you've walked through church doors in months, something is wrong.. If you profess to be a Christian, and therefore claim Christ to be your king, and you dedicate your one hour a week to Jesus, but every other 167 hours, how you treat others, forgive others, parent your children, speak to your spouse, conduct yourself at work, that belongs to you, something's wrong.. And if Jesus isn't your king, I'll say this to you: please don't fool yourself into thinking that you have no king or god. You do- your god is likely your physical attractiveness, or your success, or your money, or your comfort, or your family's approval, or just yourself. That's likely your god and king- and you will give everything you have to that god, and find out they are cruel gods who take and take and take and give little in return. If what the angels say is correct, and what you just sang is correct- "Glory to the newborn king," then Jesus is the true God and king there is no limit to what we owe to him- everything we have, every breath, every minute, every dollar, every talent, every relationship, every possession ultimately comes from him. Our entire lives belong to him, and because our lives don't reflect that, he could destroy us forever, and he'd be right to do it. That is terrifying..

But listen to the angels. Don't be afraid- because the Lord comes to earth not as a judge, or a destroyer, or even a teacher. He's a savior. Do you know what this means? Christmas is not for good people. If you're a good person, I'm not sure I have anything for you. Are you selfish? Are you lazy? Are you ill-tempered? Are you a bad person? Jesus came for us. Jesus came for the screwups. He came for those who don't have their lives together. He came for the people who have hurt people. That's why he came- to become one of you, to dedicate everything he had and was to you, to be your sacrifice- to suffer in your place, to be humiliated, to be tortured and executed on the Cross so you could be unconditionally forgiven and accepted by God. Your King came to you, his enemy, and died for you, his enemy, so that you could be accepted his friend. If you are not sure about Jesus, or feel "meh" about Jesus, I ask you this: What other god would do this for you? What other god would trade the throne of heavenly glory for a feed trough, a crown for a cross, life for death, because he wanted to save you from Hell? What other God would die for his enemies? Only Jesus. Only Jesus is worth denying yourself, your desires, your preferences in obedience to him. This is why the Angels say peace on earth and goodwill to God's favored people- because the terror of Christmas can only be drowned by this fact: He's also your friend. Christmas, and the entire life and work and death and resurrection of Christ means that you can submit yourself to him, worship him alone, obey him alone, love him above all things because he has already given everything, his very self to you. Christmas means that Jesus became like you so you, even if you die, can be immortal and glorious like him. Christmas means that Jesus became humiliated so you could be glorified at his side in Heaven. Christmas

means you were worth more than Heaven's throne to him, worth more than his own life to him. He's a king worth following.

That night wasn't silent, nor was it peaceful. Yet, if you look at the end of the bulletin, we are still singing Silent Night. Because even if that particular night wasn't silent or peaceful, tonight your hearts can be. Because Christmas isn't just a story or a legend or an account that's mostly true with some cool, crazy twists added. Your peace is founded on something concrete, real, and true. On a real night in a real Bethlehem in a real Judea in a real Roman Empire, a real host of Angels celebrated with joy and wonder as a real Mary gave birth to a real Jesus, who would conquer Satan, sin, and death itself forever. And no, none of it was peaceful. They were all terrified. But you don't need to be- God has become one with you, you have his favor, and there is peace between you and your king. Amen.