

CHRISTMAS DAY

December 25, 2022

Luke 2:8-20:

“Response to Presents and Presence

- I. Worldly Response to Presents and Presence
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Response to Presents and Presence Luke 2:8-20

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

After waking up one Christmas morning, I ran downstairs with my siblings to see a mountain of gifts under the tree. The tradition in the Abbott household has always been church first, presents later. That's even the case on this very day. Stacking the presents we all received in front of our respective seats on the couch was the loophole that preserved the excitement we felt that same morning. That year, having asked for a tower of presents, I had a stack of presents that almost hit the ceiling. However, my joy was lacking compared to the excitement I had felt on previous Christmas days. I was overwhelmed, and even my parents noticed that something was off as we all opened our gifts. I should have been so happy! And yet, I wasn't.

In retrospect, I felt like Charlie Brown in the film, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Charlie Brown, feeling depressed and overwhelmed during the Christmas season, said to his buddy Linus, "I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel. I just don't understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents and sending Christmas cards and decorating trees and all that, but I'm still not happy. I always end up feeling depressed." Linus responds, "Charlie Brown, you're the only person I know who can take a wonderful season like Christmas and turn it into a problem. Maybe Lucy's right. Of all the Charlie Browns in the world, you're the Charlie Browniest."

It's no secret that our focus on what Christmas is supposed to be about has shifted dramatically. The pressures of the holiday sales and the commercialized wasteland that flood this season are overwhelming. They have only grown and continue to grow. With that, even family traditions are to blame for distraction. The focus shifts to a worldly response to presents (as in gifts) and presence (as in being there).

Worldly Response To Presents And Presence

The priority on Christmas, as our culture has laid on our shoulders, is that we must give our presents and presence to others and likewise receive such things. It's a must to have seven different dinners with different sides of the family and friends, we must get just the right gift for and from everyone, and if there is no Christmas ham, well, then we just might die. The proper response to everything going smoothly, to our gracious host for having us and preparing a meal, and to our friend who bought us a special gift, is to say, "Thank you!" Often, when that's all said and done, we tend to feel like Charlie Brown, saying to ourselves, "I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel." Or maybe, we feel this way because we don't have people in our lives to share the holidays with. Perhaps unresolved health or family issues are causing struggle and strife in your life. Or, with no good reason, it's because a tower of presents overwhelmed us.

So how are we truly supposed to feel on this day? As our culture and media generate in us the buying of gifts and the hosting of dinners, our text for today (the Christmas Gospel) generates in us the true meaning of Christmas. As Arthur A. Just Jr. put in his commentary on Luke, "It generates the telling of the Good News, evokes faith, and creates worship of Christ the Child, who is Himself the presence of God, the Word made flesh." You see, Christmas is not about our worldly response to the presents and the presence of others in the context of commercialism. It is about responding to the eternal presents and presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. The only similarity between the two is that our response should always be a "Thank you!" Not a "thank you" given with an expectation of feeling a certain way, but a "thank you" to God that He has delivered His people from depression, sadness, and ultimately, death. It is a "thank you" that receives God's gifts and presence through the preaching of the Word and the receiving of the Sacraments. It is a "thank you" that shares the Gospel of Jesus with others. These things are available thanks to this baby we read about, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

The Telling of the Good News

Our text for this morning's message begins with recounting the events that led up to the shepherds visiting Jesus. Mary had given birth to Jesus in the lowly place, in the lowly manger, with no place for them anywhere else. The Word made flesh has already come into this world and begun to serve its purpose immediately. The telling of the Good News has already begun! Luke gives us a clear-cut understanding of the events happening outside the manger and not far from where the baby Jesus lays His head. His Gospel states, "And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.'"

Jesus Christ, The Good News, had been announced to the first people on record. And it was not reported to Kings or the leaders of the Jews. Jesus' birth was announced to the lowly shepherds just as He came into the world in lowly circumstances. Christ often flips humanity's expectations upside down. He especially did so for the people of the time of His birth and throughout His ministry. These people expected the Savior to come in secular glory to save them from worldly ailments. They expected Jesus to rule like all the Kings they had known by coming to be served. But the Lord God had a different plan in mind. The Good News, God's presence here on earth, served a different purpose. As Jesus said to James and John in Mark 10, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Well, there you have it—the Good News for you and me. Jesus Christ did not come to us as both man and God to give us a kingdom on earth. No, he came for much more. He came to be our mediator and to bear our cross. He came to be the one who would take on our sins, suffer, and die so that we may have eternal life by faith in Him. He came because God wants all of mankind to be saved. As Luther said, "The manger and the cross are never far apart." This baby is born to die for you. He is born into our misery, our helplessness, and our lowliness to redeem us for Himself. He is born to bridge the gap between sinful man and God. He is born so that by His suffering and death and resurrection, we may be sons of God. Our God is a man who steps into the scale and dies. And so, we live.

Evokes Faith

The hearing of such a miraculous event then evokes faith in the shepherds and in us. Our text states, "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." Picture this: you're sitting in your office or at your job, and angels appear to you saying such things. You'd probably smell your coffee to ensure it wasn't spiked with something. Rather than wondering what might have caused such a miraculous event, the shepherds in the field took action. That action was an act of faith. They had no way of knowing whether or not they were indeed going to find this baby in a manger, let alone God in the flesh! Yet, they went. Curiosity alone was not their goal, and they certainly did not go with mere speculation. They went with faith and haste, saying, "The Lord told us about this." This event that they experienced was not up for debate between them. Through the angels, God had given them divine revelation about what had happened in that lowly manger. Lo and behold, when the shepherds finally reached the manger, everything they had been told was true. And, what better way to honor such a revelation than to believe it and to tell others of it? The telling and the response of the people hearing of Jesus in amazement is truly a beautiful act of faith. It was a proper response to the presence of the Savior who would bring the best present of all: our eternal salvation through faith in Him.

The account of the shepherds visiting Jesus ends with a most applicable part of their experience. After all is said and done, after they had been told of The Good News, were faithful, and told others of what they had seen, they worshiped. Our text ends with these words, "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

Worship of Christ the Child

As the Gospel of Jesus does so for us, what they had experienced brought about "Worship of Christ the Child, who is Himself the presence of God, the Word made flesh." The shepherds acknowledged the baby lying in the manger as the very Savior prophesied in our Old Testament lesson, which states, "Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense is before him." The most important gifts that the Lord has bestowed upon us are His forgiveness, life, and salvation. Christ, through his suffering and death, would go on to purchase and win us from the hold of sin and death. This means for the shepherds and us that God is appeased for those who believe on this baby's name. Jesus, the giver of all these gifts, was present before them and continues to be present to us in Word and Sacrament.

What the shepherds did in worship is what we are doing right now at this very moment. The divine gifts which they witnessed evoked a response. Right now, in the Divine Service, we focus on Christ, who is present for us and with us through His Word. Christ is living and active among us, right where He has promised to be in His Word and Sacrament, saying, "Lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 18:20). When He gathers us around His Word and Sacraments, He fulfills this promise to us repeatedly as He has done many times throughout history and will continue to do so.

I ask you again, how are we truly supposed to feel on this day? It's certainly okay to feel overwhelmed by the ridiculousness of the commercial holiday season, to feel bogged down by not enough or too many presents, and that you're not feeling the way you're supposed to feel. But if you are to find any comfort, if you are genuinely seeking what Christmas is all about, if you want to understand Christmas, take after the shepherds. There weren't any presents for the shepherds, nor were there any decorations or a Macy's they could go to for gifts for their hearers. All the shepherds had was the beautiful hymn of the angels and the scene of the manger; that was all that mattered. They had the greatest gift: The Good News. That was the heart of it. That's the best gift you can give or receive. Christmas is not about a tower of presents but Christ's towering presence that overshadows all. So, go to your celebrations, have special dinners, celebrate with your family and friends, or enjoy the comfort of your home. Regardless of your circumstances and how happy or sad you may feel today, remember this, you have been given the greatest gift you can receive: salvation through faith in Christ and the promise of eternal life in heaven. In Christ, God truly loves you. In response to that love, like the shepherds, share The Good News with those around you. At all times and on this Christmas Day, hear and proclaim The Good News that is Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice for us, have faith in Him who died so that we may have eternal life, and worship Him in thanks and praise for all He has done for us. Look around you. You might just be doing all of that right now.

Amen.

Seminarian Lucas Abbott