

First Sunday after the Nativity of Our Lord

December 31, 2017

The Rev. Allen C. Hoger • Immanuel Evang. Lutheran Church, Wichita, KS

A somewhat aged priest, born into the tribe of Levi and ordained for life, after years of waiting to be called now stands at the altar of incense in the Great Temple of Jerusalem. Suddenly an angel suddenly appears, scaring him to death. For this is no fairy-like, greeting-card angel. *Gibbor* means “mighty warrior” – Goliath was a Philistine *gibbor* – and this angel is *Gibbor-El*, “warrior of God,” GABRIEL. His message, too, is scary, at least to this old man: “You are going to be a father.” When he makes the mistake of asking for proof, the angel takes away Zechariah’s ability to speak; now he cannot tell anyone what has happened.

But then Luke quickly takes us away from Jerusalem, far north to the Galilean home of a young maid; it is now six months after the apparition to the old priest. In comes *Gibbor-El* and declares to Mary, “Greetings, O favored one!” (Apparently, frightening Zechariah was not enough.) “Peace,” he tells her – although his message offers no kind of earthly peace. It will noting less than *the peace that surpasses all understanding* to calm her heart; for though not yet wed, Mary is about to conceive the heir who shall sit on the throne of King David forever.

But the peace of God does come to her, and nothing louder has ever been heard than the virgin’s meek reply, “Behold the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me as you have said.” She sounds just like her son in Gethsemane. Then she hurries off on a long trip to visit Elizabeth, and there offers her canticle of praise that has become our prayer in the Daily Office for evening, *Magnificat*.

It is now several months later still, and Luke introduces us to Joseph, who has received a visit of his own, and in obedience to God has taken Mary as his wife. But as if this were not test enough, now the imperial government’s power to intrude requires him to travel with her back to Judea, so that he can sign onto the tax-rolls. They arrive in his ancestral home of Bethlehem.

It is here, 81 verses into Luke’s narrative, that we arrive at the birth of Jesus, to which the evangelist then devotes a total of two verses. As soon as Christ is laid in the manger the evangelist takes us away yet again, this time into the open countryside, where a group of Judean night watchmen, rough & earthy men, are guarding sheep. You guessed it: They, too, are struck down by fear, but this time the *Gibbor* comes accompanied by what Luke calls, literally, a *multitude of the heavenly army*. But it is an army that starts singing! For the message this time is the Good News itself: The promised Savior of the world, Christ the Lord, has been born.

So strong is the angels’ joy that it dispels the terror of the shepherds, who then speed into town, behold the infant, and relate to Mary & Joseph what just happened to them, including the message announced to them from the sky. The new mother – that is, she who now has become the Mother of God – puts their astonishing report together with what she already understands, and keeps it all inside... until the day should come for the whole story to be told...

Meanwhile, back to Jerusalem, where the holy family, as they come to fulfill the ritual obligations of Israel, are met in the temple precincts by two faithful servants of God – Simeon and Anna. We have now arrived at today’s text.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Luke’s account from Zechariah to Anna consumes 218 verses – over three and a half pages of a standard, two-column Bible. And out of 185 lines of text, the actual event of Jesus’ birth occupies four lines. In other words, the story of Jesus’s birth in the Gospel According to Luke is the story of Zechariah & Elizabeth and Joseph & Mary; of Simeon & Anna, and of shepherds whose names we may only

learn in the world to come.

And yet this long and intricate narrative, with its variety of faces, its shift of scenes, its canticles of praise, is from beginning to end the story all about Jesus Christ and his Kingdom. It is about how Christ, even hundreds of years before he was born, shaped the lives of men and women who staked their lives on the prophetic promise of his future coming. It is about how as a infant he came as Lord to Simeon of Jerusalem, who knew his Scriptures very well; and how Christ summoned those shepherds of Judea, who most certainly could not read a line of Hebrew text, but who believed God's Word when the angel said, "*A Savior has been born to you...*" It is about how the coming of Christ transformed the retirement years of one priestly couple by their becoming the parents of John the Baptist; and about Christ becoming for another couple both the baby they must feed and clothe, and the King who was come to redeem them and all Israel.

And to redeem people *from every tribe and language and people and nation*. Simeon's words are not just a final episode; his canticle, *Nunc Dimittis*, wraps it all up: If there is any glory to being a Jew, that glory came to earth in the very person of Jesus the Messiah, son of Mary. If there shines any light on this fallen world to give hope to any nation, that light of hope is Jesus of Nazareth. And if there is anything that can make your life complete, that can give you such peace and contentment today & tomorrow that you can say at any moment, "Lord, it is perfectly fine with me if you choose for me to leave this world right here and now..." Such a peace comes when you, like Simeon, have looked on the face of Christ and realized that (if we may borrow here the words of St. Paul)...

...All the promises of God find their Yes in him.

This does not mean that life becomes easy – for Zechariah, for Mary, or for you. The Son of God became mortal flesh to do combat against the false gods and demonic powers at work in the world. This is why the News of his nativity was announced, not by some cute Precious Moments figurine angel, but by a heavenly Warrior of God. Those who follow the newborn Prince of Peace now follow a Son of God who, as the hymn says, "Goes Forth to War." Picture Simeon holding the infant Christ, gazing at him, and uttering these words:

"Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against..."

He then raises his head, looks Mary straight in the eye, and tells her:

"...and a sword will pierce through your own soul also."

This is powerful, soul-gripping stuff. We all know that Christmas is not about Santa, or even about presents. We know it's not about baking or feasting. But contrary to what many in our culture proclaim, Christmas is not even about family ties or loved ones gathering. Christmas is about the divine redemption of the world, about our very Creator becoming human flesh and forming a new family out of those who believe in him as their very life and seek to follow him to the end. So it was that on the cross Jesus looked down on Mary and the Apostle John standing beside each other and said, "Behold your mother... Behold your Son."

And so it is that at this time of year the whole family gathers around the tree of the Cross – Zechariah & Elizabeth, Joseph & Mary, Simeon, Anna, and the shepherds – and we join them in their praise of God. And their stories remind us that, even when the songs of joy are at their highest and purest, the way of Christ in this world never ceases to be the way of the cross. When John writes from Patmos to his family, to the seven churches, he calls himself

...your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance

The Christmas joy that Simeon feels in today's Gospel is not the happiness someone can generate by turning away from difficulties and striving to get happy. No, Simeon's joy is like that described by Simon Peter in his

first epistle:

*Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad
when his glory is revealed.*

I do hope your days of Christmas have been happy ones, that you have enjoyed the company of relatives and other loved ones, that you who enjoyed a Christmas vacation got to take it easy. But today I am here to remind you that the joy which the Son of God has brought to our world helps most when things are not easy, when life is hard and we feel alone. Christmas joy is most vital when the sinner stung by guilt finds in Christ free and full forgiveness, when the power of Jesus' resurrection makes the weight of a loved one's death easier to bear.

The story of Jesus' birth is the story of his Kingdom, and his kingdom comes to us when we believe in Him and live by that faith . One day, when the time for all journeying is over, he who first came wearing the disguise of a poor & helpless human child shall come again...

*Not as of old a little child, To bear and fight and die,
But crowned with glory like the sun That lights the morning sky.*

On that day we shall all leave this vale of tears, and the Savior on whose fragile infant form Simeon once cast his eyes, we shall behold face-to-face in all his undisguised splendor. ☩