

“The Christmas Story as Retold by Martin Luther”

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Introduction:

Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation in 1517 when he protested against the Catholic Church for fleecing the poor and gullible. His protest later turned into a more sustained theological critique of the Catholic Church for failing to preach the gospel correctly according to the New Testament. Luther was both a professor of theology and a monk who dared to challenge the pope and his interpretation of the Bible. When Luther broke with the Catholic Church, he left the monastery behind and married a former nun. By this daring act, they proclaimed that marriage was not a second-rate lifestyle for a Christian, inferior to the celibate lives of priests, monks, and nuns. Luther came from peasant stock and his sometimes coarse and unrefined language reflected his peasant background. John Wesley, the first Methodist, felt his heart “strangely warmed” upon hearing words of Luther read aloud at a church meeting in London. May your hearts, too, be strangely warmed, as you hear Luther retell the Christmas story.

Here are Luther’s Words¹:

Our Lord Jesus Christ was born of a line of ancestors that included some disreputable characters and some unsavory women we read about in the Old Testament. God holds before us this mirror of sinners that we may know that Christ is sent to sinners, and from sinners is willing to be born.

¹ *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book*, ed. Roland H. Bainton (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

Now when the time came for Christ to be born, it was a time of utter bitterness and extreme poverty for the Jews. They were a downtrodden people and their lot was wretched, much like ours here today in Germany. Because of their pitiable condition, all the people wept bitterly. God allows the godly to be powerless and oppressed so that everyone thinks they are done for, yet even in that very moment God is most powerfully present, though hidden and concealed. When human power fails, God's power begins, provided that faith is present and expectant. Even so, Christ was powerless on the cross, and yet he was most mighty there, overcoming sin, death, the world, hell, and the devil. For this reason, we Christians have the gospel, so that when we fall into distress and lowliness, God may thereby do his work in us.

The way was paved for the ministry of our Lord by the forerunner, John the Baptist. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias and announced that his wife Elizabeth should bear a son named John who would bring many people to Christ.

This same angel appeared to the virgin Mary and announced to her that she would bear a son named Jesus. Among the downtrodden people she was one of the lowliest, not a maid of high station in the capital city of Jerusalem but a daughter of a plain man in the small town of Nazareth. We may infer that she was of no account because she herself said, "God hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden." In the village of Nazareth, she appeared as a mere servant, tending the cattle and the house and no more esteemed than a maid among us who does her chores. She was probably between thirteen and fifteen years old. And yet this was the one whom God chose. He might have gone to Jerusalem and picked Caiaphas' daughter who was rich, clad in gold-embroidered gowns, and attended by a retinue of maidens. But God preferred a lowly maid from an insignificant town. Probably Mary was doing the housework when the

angel came to her. Angels prefer to come to people when they are fulfilling their daily duties at work. The angels also appeared to the shepherds when they were tending their flocks by night.

The angel greeted her, saying, “Hail Mary, full of grace.” But no German talks like this. This is Latin, not German. We Germans would say, “God bless you, dear Mary.” The angel’s words so overwhelmed the poor girl that she did not know what was happening to her. That’s why Gabriel said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Your child shall be the messiah of Israel.” Well might Mary have replied: “Who am I, a little worm, that I should bear the messiah?” She might have doubted but, instead, she trusted in God. She was indeed puzzled and said, “How can these things be, seeing that I have not known a man?”

Now, the virgin birth is a miracle, but we should not overestimate it. For God, the virgin birth is a mere trifle; the greater miracle is that God should become human and dwell among us as one of us. This is the hardest miracle for us to believe: not that Jesus was born of a virgin but that God did all this *for us*! The hardest thing of all is to believe is that this Son of God is *ours*. For, if we really believe that God loves us this much to be born like one of us, then we will become new people. As the prophet declared: “*Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given*” (Isa. 9:6). The hard thing is not to believe that a virgin could give birth to a child, but that God did this out of sheer love for us.

See how humble Mary is about all this! She is so humble that she doesn’t even know that she is humble. She doesn’t know how she is going to conceive a child but leaves everything to God. She claims for herself no merits or achievements or virtue. She behaves just as she did before. She isn’t puffed up and doesn’t run through the town yelling that she is going to be the mother of the messiah! No, she just goes about her business as usual, milking the cows, scrubbing the kettles, sweeping the house like any housemaid who does the most menial tasks.

She was still nothing more than a simple village girl, one of the lowliest people there was. How many of her neighbors talked with her, ate with her, and perhaps even looked down upon her without knowing what the angel had told her!

But God subjected her to a severe trial. She was engaged to a man named Joseph and yet she was found to be with child before they had married. Joseph was very much disturbed when he learned that his fiancé was already with child. Joseph could hardly assume anything but the worst of her. If that had happened to you or me, what would we have thought? Anyone in his shoes would have said, "I wouldn't have her now even if she were a royal princess." Had Joseph wished to follow the letter of the law, he could have denounced her and she would have been stoned. But the Bible says that Joseph was a just man and therefore didn't make to make a public spectacle of the matter, so he resolved to end their engagement quietly. He did not wish to hurt her public reputation, though he considered her hopeless. This holy virgin was judged by her own fiancé to be a loose woman. This holy maid could not come to honor before she had first been put to shame. Here she was, deserted by her fiancé and with child. But an angel came to Joseph and said, "Fear not; there is no dishonor or disgrace. She is with child by the Holy Spirit." Joseph had nothing to go on except the Word of God and faith. A godless man would have said it was just a dream, but Joseph believed God's Word and took Mary for his wife.

Some claim that since Christ was born of a virgin, virginity is superior to marriage. But note well that Christ was not born to a nun who had taken a vow of celibacy! Mary lived with her husband and no one even knew she was a virgin. Her virginity was concealed from the world, while her marriage to Joseph was publicly proclaimed to the world. No one enters heaven because he has taken a vow of celibacy, but only through faith in this little child born of Mary.

The birth of Jesus took place when the Emperor Caesar Augustus sent out a decree that all the world should be taxed. This was no accident. God wanted to teach us the duty of obedience to a heathen government. At the moment of his birth, the parents of Jesus had to give their obedience to the heathen emperor, the enemy of the Jews. This is the strongest proof that Christ's kingdom is to be distinguished from the kingdoms of this world. Christ was not the sort of Lord who fights with the sword and has to do with civil government. Rather, he rules us with the gracious preaching of peace. Christ was a preacher, which is why he declined civil government. I too am a preacher, which is why I decline interference in the affairs of civil government. But Christ did not condemn civil government as wrong, and neither do I condemn it. It is wrong for me simply because I am not called to do it. God gives to each his own task. Christ was a preacher, Augustus was an emperor, the shepherds were shepherds.

Because Joseph was of the lineage of David, he had to return to Bethlehem, the city of David, since each householder had to be present in his own hometown for the census. Mary might well have stayed back in Nazareth since she was hardly well enough to make this arduous journey; but probably Joseph was so poor that he couldn't even afford to hire some old woman or neighbor to stay with Mary while he was gone.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, the inn was full. Mary and Joseph had to go to a cow stall, and there Mary gave birth to the king of kings. When they should have been riding in a golden carriage and staying in the finest lodgings, they were shoved into a stable to sleep with the cattle, while many cutthroats were wining and dining at the inn. Poor Mary had none of the things necessary for childbirth: no light, no heat, no pan, no midwife to look after her. The guests at the inn were carousing but no one was there to help her in childbirth. Who showed the poor girl what to do? She had never had a baby before. I am amazed that the little one did not

freeze to death. It must have gone straight to her heart that she was abandoned. Her eyes were probably moist with tears, because she was a human being and not a stone. Then after the birth, she put the baby in a manger. Why not in a cradle, or on a bench or a table? Because there was no cradle or bench or table. The manger was the first throne for the king of kings. Think, women: there was no one there to wash the baby. No warm water, not even cold water.

Oh, what a dark night in Bethlehem it was that this should have happened to the Son of God. This shows that God has no regard for the world and its lords and ladies arrayed in their fine clothing and enjoying their luxuries; and that the world has no regard for God and God's servants. Shame on you, wretched Bethlehem! The inn ought to have burned with brimstone, for even though Mary were a beggar, somebody at that time should have been glad to give her a hand. There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: "If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby and his mother. I would have gladly washed his linen. I would have gone with the shepherds to see the baby." You say that because you know how great the Christ is, but had you been there you would have done no better than the people in Bethlehem. What childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need you do to the Lord Christ himself.

Let us, then, meditate on this nativity of our Lord. He was a real baby who was born, just as our babies are. I would not have you contemplate his divinity but, rather, his humanity. Let us look upon this human baby Jesus. If we think of his divinity, we will be frightened since the majesty of God will crush us. That is why God took on our humanity, that we should not be terrified by God's power but rather perceive God's love and mercy toward us. You should take comfort and find consolation in this. Do not doubt. Watch him sitting in the lap of the maiden.

Laugh with him. Look upon this Lord of peace and your spirit will be at peace. See how God invites you. God places before you a baby whom you cannot fear. Who can be afraid of a baby since there is nothing more appealing than a little baby? You will see how great is God's goodness, who does not want you to fear and be in despair. Trust Christ! Here is the child in whom your salvation has come. To me there is no greater consolation than this, that the Christ child is lying in his mother's lap and drinking milk from her breasts. Who is there who would not be comforted by this sight? Now has the power of sin, death, hell, and the devil been overcome. Even your sins and your guilty conscience have been overcome. This baby has not come to judge you but to save you.

Now, while all this was happening in the stable, there were shepherds watching their flocks by night. That was a mean job, watching flocks by night. Common sense calls it low-down work, and the men who do it are regarded as trash. But the angel proclaimed his message only to these shepherds. Why? Because these shepherds were pure in heart and content with their work, not aspiring to be townsmen or nobles, nor envious of the mighty. Next to faith this is the hardest thing in life: to be content with the calling to which God has called you. I have not yet learned this lesson myself. It is the trick of the devil that none of us is content with our station in life: "If only I were this! If only I were that!" You fool. The best job you can do is the one you have. If you are a servant, you have a very great status. There are no greater saints on earth than servants. Be content with your status, as Mary was content with her status and the shepherds were content with theirs.

Who would have thought that men whose job was tending unreasoning animals would be so praised that not even a pope or a bishop is worthy of receiving the message of the angel? Neither Caiaphas nor the high priests were deemed worthy of receiving this message. Neither

was Herod nor Caesar. I would rather be one of those shepherds than that the pope should make me a saint or the emperor make me a king. Why didn't the angel go to Jerusalem to confer with Herod and the high priests? No, instead he went to Bethlehem, that dung heap compared with Jerusalem.

The angel said to the shepherds, "Fear not, for I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all the people." *All* the people! Not just for Peter and for Paul, not just for popes and bishops, but for all of you. The angel announces a savior who will free us from all *our* fears. The Christ child is God's gift to us so that we will not be afraid of the judgment of God, of hell, of damnation. It is not enough to hear this story as if it were just past history. We act as though it were a frigid historical fact that does not melt our hearts. But it is God's gift to you today. If someone told you he had found a million German Marks on the road, you'd say: "What does that have to do with me?" What is it to me if someone else has riches, honors, and a pretty wife? But what if you were the one who found this great wealth? It is only if it is my good news that I rejoice! Therefore, when you hear the angel say that "unto you" is born this day, in the city of David, a savior, you should think to yourself: "This Christ is mine, God did this for me. I am now wealthy, I now have honors, I now have love."

And as soon as the message was delivered to these poor shepherds, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host. There are more angels in heaven than blades of grass. You'd think that some of these angels might have gone down to help poor Mary with her infant child and taken him a golden cradle or a feather bed or some warm blanket. So why didn't they? They were singing that he is the Lord and the Christ, so why didn't they lend him a hand? That is something we cannot understand. We shall simply have to wait until the resurrection when we can ask them ourselves.

Nonetheless, the joy over the birth of the messiah was so great that God couldn't keep the angels in heaven. They had to break out of heaven and announce to human beings the great joy of his birth. Of course, the angels would have had a much bigger celebration if God had allowed them to do so, but he wished to teach them to despise the pomp of the world and its frivolous celebrations.

If one does not know the baby Jesus, it is impossible that one should rightly honor God. Because people do not know and revere this child, they rage and devour one another. Where this child is accepted, however, there will be plenty and healing upon the earth. For, without this child, what is this world if not a downright hell, where there is nothing but lying, greed, gluttony, drunkenness, adultery, assault, and murder. Friends can be no more trusted here than foes. But those who hear the angels sing and receive the baby Jesus give due honor to God and to their neighbors. Where God is honored, there people are friendly, loving, without hate and envy, regarding each other as greater than themselves, and saying to one another, "Dear brother or sister, pray for me."

It is a great miracle that the shepherds believed this message. They might easily have thought to themselves, "Are we shepherds so worthy that all the host of heaven should be marshalled for our sake while the kings of the earth and the priests in Jerusalem should be passed by?" But they were strong in their faith and believed the good news about Christ. Our God begins with angels and ends with shepherds. Why does God do such a preposterous thing? He puts a baby in a manger. Our common sense revolts and we say to ourselves, "Could not God have saved the world in some other way?" I would not have sent an angel. I would simply have said to the devil, "Let my people go." The Christian faith is foolish. It says that God can do anything and yet it makes him so weak and powerless. Why didn't God just send an angel to

take the devil by the nose? Instead, he sends, as it were, an earthworm, lying in weakness, helpless, and allows him to be nailed on a cross. Then in his weakness, he cracks the devil's back, and alters the whole world. He allows himself to be trodden under foot and crucified, but then through weakness he establishes his kingdom.

God is amazing. The babe in the manger, not worthy of a proper bed in a proper inn, is yet called the Savior and Lord. If I had come to Bethlehem and seen it, I would have said, "This makes no sense to me. How can this be the messiah? This is sheer nonsense."

But we see that the preaching and singing of the angels were not in vain. How do we know this? Because the shepherds themselves became preachers. Although they loved their sheep, they went at once to see the babe and told everybody what they had experienced. And then we are told that Mary pondered all these things in her heart. Why did she ponder them in her heart? Because she too was in need of preaching. Even though she was the mother of the messiah, she needed to ponder these words in her heart in order to strengthen her faith and increase her assurance. There was nothing kingly about her baby or about the circumstances of his birth. So, without the shepherds' words, Mary like everybody else would have had a hard time believing that he was the king of Israel. You see, Mary is the example of what it means to be a true Christian. Mary wrapped her newborn child in the word of the gospel announced by the angel and preached by the shepherds. The swaddling clothes signify the preaching of the gospel. The manger signifies the place where Christians come together to hear the word of the gospel preached. The ox and ass signify all of us who listen to the gospel where it is preached.

What once happened to Christ now happens to the gospel. There was no room for him in the inn. Today there is no room for the gospel even with the pope, the bishops, the theologians, the monks, nuns, and priests. They all tread the gospel underfoot. They boast that they have

built grand churches and endowed masses to be said for the dead. But God says: “What are your churches and your masses to me? What do I care about your altars and your bells?” Christ’s kingdom is not to be found among the wise and powerful of this world, but rather among the lowly and the despised. We must close our eyes to all that glitters before the world and look rather on the despised and the foolish things; we must help the poor, comfort the dejected, and aid the neighbor in his need. Those who seek Christ anywhere else will not find him. The Magi found him not at Herod’s court, not with the high priests, not in the great city of Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem, in the stable, with lowly folk, with Mary and Joseph and those stinky shepherds. In a word, they found him where they least expected to find him. This Christmas, may you too find Christ where you least expect to find him: his majesty hidden in humility, his power hidden in weakness, his wisdom hidden in foolishness, his star shining above the manger where he lies wrapped in swaddling clothes. Amen.