

**The Nativity of Our Lord – Christmas Eve**  
**December 24, 2016**  
**Luke 2:1-20**

***“Family Life: Outcasts and Outsiders”***

It's that time of year when family comes together for the holidays. Some people look forward to this and get very excited about it because you get to catch up with people you don't see every day. But that's not the case for everyone. Some folks have to take a deep breath, count to 10, and brace themselves for all this family togetherness. The reason for this is that there have been disagreements, disputes, and divisions within the family that put people within that family on edge when they get together. All of those grievances and grudges have a way of manifesting themselves at the holidays, it seems. When everybody comes from near and far to spend Christmas together, it isn't always “tidings of comfort and joy.” Check out all the Netflix Christmas movies that are out there which depict this very thing. As the old saying goes, there are in-laws and there are out-laws in the family. Sound familiar? Maybe this is where you're coming from this Christmas. If so, there is good news for you. The birth of Jesus is not just for the “perfect” people who seem to have life all figured out and have their act together. The birth of Jesus is for outcasts and outsiders as well. On this Christmas Eve, the message for this evening follows that theme for preaching during Advent, “Family Life,” and is entitled “Outcasts and Outsiders.” May the Lord's rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

Outcasts and outsiders were part of that first Christmas, something you may not even be aware of. When the angel of the Lord appeared to those shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, telling them: **“Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy...”** (Luke 2:10), the angel came to outcasts and outsiders. “The news of Jesus' birth was not announced to the successful and powerful living in their palaces in Jerusalem and elsewhere. It was announced to those classified as outcasts. After all, shepherds worked on the Sabbath and permitted their flocks to graze on land belonging to others. Because they cared for animals belonging to others, the owners feared that the shepherds might kill one of their animals and share its meat with their immediate family. Shepherds were not permitted to give evidence in a court of law. They were not even permitted to enter the Jerusalem temple!” (*Christmas: The Real Story*, by Harry Wendt. Minneapolis: Crossways International, 1998; p. 27). And yet, these are the ones to whom the angel of the Lord brings the awesome and amazing news: **“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”** (Luke 2:11). Time and time again in Scripture, God chooses what is lowly and despised by the world to work his gracious will. He chose a poor young peasant girl to be the mother of the Savior. He chose as his birthplace not the capital city with all of its glitz and glamor, but a backwater village that was the hometown of a long-ago king. He chose shepherds who were outcasts and outsiders to be the first to hear of the Savior's birth. Do we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear how God did this not only then, but today as well? May the Lord open our eyes to see and our ears to hear how He is at work in the world and in our lives even now!

Jesus was born in a place and at a time very much like our own. Palestine of the first century was marked by great political uncertainty, security threats within and without, power struggles, acts of terrorism and outbreaks of violence, together with cynicism, distrust, and skepticism for those in positions of leadership. We might well say the same of our own situation in the twenty-first century. The good news here is that we have a Savior who is not far removed from daily life here on planet Earth. We do not have a Savior who is high and lofty above our existence, detached and disconnected from the grief, pain, and suffering of humanity. No, we have a Savior who chose to become one of us; who willingly entered into our troubled world shattered by the effects of sin. We certainly see these effects on a macro, cosmic level that has world-wide implications. But we also see these effects also on a micro, individual level in each of our lives – effects that lead to distance, separation, and estrangement between people, even within the same family, creating outcasts and outsiders. This is the world into which Jesus was born. This is the world which Jesus dearly loves, and for which He gave his life. You see, the wood of that manger in Bethlehem will give way to the wood of the cross of Calvary. In the midst of our Christmas celebrating,

beyond the presents under the tree, beyond the feasting and Christmas goodies, is the truth that Jesus' birth will lead to his suffering and death upon the cross for us and for our salvation. Jesus was born to die; to be the once-for-all sacrifice for us all; to pay the price for our sin and disobedience, not with gold or silver, but with his holy and precious blood (1 Peter 1:18-19). There is a direct connection between Christmas and Good Friday; between Jesus' crib and his cross. That connection is rooted in love for outcasts and outsiders like you and me.

A year ago, I wrote the following in our congregation's December 2015 newsletter. It seems appropriate to share with you again now: "The scenario is all too familiar: a small family – dad, mom, and baby – fleeing for their lives from a corrupt government. To remain where they lived would mean certain death. They had to gather what belongings they could pull together and make a run for it. Such scenarios – stories and photos – have been before us a lot during the past months, but the one I am referencing took place some 2000 years ago. I am referring to Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus having to flee Bethlehem because of Herod's order that all male children two years old and under should be killed. We are told that an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and instructed him to take the child and his mother and go to Egypt (see Matthew 2:13-18). Very early in life, Jesus knew what it was like to be uprooted and displaced; [to be an outcast and an outsider]; to live in a different land with different customs where everything was new and strange. The soft light of the manger in Bethlehem, "the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay," gives way to harsh and ugly realities that we'd rather not think about. On the church's calendar, after we celebrate Jesus' birth on Christmas Day, we then commemorate the Holy Innocents a few days later on December 28, remembering those young lives cut short by greed and fear."

Over the last year, our congregation has been working with Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area (<http://lssnca.org>) to sponsor a refugee family. Just within the last two weeks, we received word that we have been assigned a family and they will arrive sometime in the new year between January and April. They are a family of seven; they are from Syria and they are Muslim. They are outcasts from their own country and outsiders to this country. Does a faith rooted in One who himself was a refugee, an outcast and outsider, have anything to say to this? I believe it does, and that especially now, in this holy season, our faith must move us beyond fear to obedience. Jesus' words are clear: "**For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me**" (Matthew 25:35-36, 40b). The Lord Jesus comes to us in the face of the hungry and the homeless, the stranger, the sick, the prisoner [the outcasts and the outsiders]. How will we respond? The call to love is often not convenient or easy; it will cost us. But then again, it also cost Jesus. Why would we think it should be any different for us?

Some will say that these words show great naiveté and a lack of understanding about world concerns. I do not claim to be an expert in this field and leave this to those who are. What I do know is that what changes hearts for good and for God is not greed or fear, but love. Joining Jesus on his mission is about taking the risk; it's about reaching outside our comfort zone to those who are around us. The mission of Jesus begins with Jesus who became that helpless Infant, who endured the hardships of being a refugee, himself an outcast and an outsider, in order that he might give himself fully for each one of us... And that is love – not just talk, but action. And now Jesus calls us to do the same: love one another not just with our words, but with our whole lives. Love others as Jesus has loved us.

In Jesus, the Word-made-flesh (John 1:14), God has entered into our world broken by sin and sorrow, reaching out with compassion and love to the hurting and oppressed, including outcasts and outsiders. We are among them. This is good news of great joy not just at Christmas, but every day. And so on this Christmas Eve, we join our voices with the angels: "**Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased**" (Luke 2:14). Amen.

