

Text: Luke 2:1-6 (7-20)

Title: "Calm and Bright?"

**READ LUKE 1:1-20 NOW AND PRAY!!**

Introduction: I stand corrected. I have been saying that each year, the people of the world spend approximately \$450 Billion on the Holiday of Christmas ... it's not the world. \$450 Billion is spent by Americans on Christmas. \$450 Billion! In the United States we have approximately 6% of the world's population and we consume 40% of the world's resources.

Studies show that there is plenty of food in the world to feed all of the people. The problem is we don't get it to them. Some people say, "Well, if God is so great why are their people starving in the U.S. and other countries?" God is in charge of production, we are in charge of distribution! God calls us to care for God's other kids...

At this time I invite you to take the insert out of your program. On one side you will see our Scripture for today and on the other you will find a brief outline walking us through our Scripture. You will see that there are blanks to fill in ... I would love to have you take the time to do so. Grab a pen and write down whatever else you think is important to you and your faith journey. After worship, take this home and refrigerate it. Please Re-read the Scripture and the notes to keep growing and learning. For those of you listening on-line or IPODing, you can download the outline off of our website so you too can take notes.

"Silent Night, Holy Night, All is Calm, all is bright" ... a picture of a perfect moment in time ... a wondrous amazing, holy night.

Problem = our Christmases never quite measure up to that picture-perfect, serene, peaceful night that we hear about in the Christmas story... our lives are usually messier. We are stressed out, tired out and not quite fitting into that Norman Rockwell painting of a Christmas that we hope for. As we compare our Christmas with the Christmas that we hear about in the Bible or in Christmas Carols ... "The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes. The little Lord Jesus no crying he makes..."

We all make plans for the Christmas holiday, but even with the best-laid plans, it never quite works out the way we expected. Chili? Stan sick ... not able to get to KY?

It's depressing that our Christmas doesn't measure up. National Women's Health Resource Center = 2/3 of women say they are depressed during the Christmas season. Men are probably depressed too. Economy, job situations, etc. So, this is Christmas!?

The stories and the carols make it seem like that 1<sup>st</sup> Christmas was just perfect. But, do you really think that it was? Do you think that 1<sup>st</sup> Christmas was all that serene and calm and bright? Let's look at it...

Augustus Caesar ... 1400 miles away in Rome ... declares that all subjects in the Roman Empire must return to their ancestral home for a census so that taxes could be taken with some integrity. The people under the Roman Empire were to go to the man's city of origin ... Mary and Joseph were essentially married according to the Jewish traditions of that time, so Mary would have gone with Joseph to his hometown. They were given a limited amount of time to get to Bethlehem, where Joseph was born and

raised, and with the Roman Empire, there were really no passes. One did whatever the Roman Empire said ... period!

The Romans don't care that Mary is nine months pregnant ... a decree from the Caesar is a decree from the Caesar. Circumstances don't matter... if she miscarries, what is that to them?!? They do not care!

Now, I'm sure that Mary had a picture in her mind of what the birth of her baby might be like. I'm thinking that as a young teenager, she would have loved to be in her own home, in her own bed, with her own mom and family mid-wife by her side. It seems to me that most women who are having babies for the first time want their own mothers around! Besides that, in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century women did not have ways of managing the pain of childbirth and many women died during childbirth. Knowing this, a woman would have liked to be in familiar surroundings with family that loved her at her side.

Going to Bethlehem, there was no promise that Mary would even find a midwife to help with the birth. She did not know where she would have the baby. She's very pregnant, but remember what she said to Gabriel when the angel approached her about giving birth to the Christ-child? She said, "May it happen as you have said."

When Mary said those words, her life was not longer about her or her comfort or convenience. It was NOT HER BIRTHDAY! I'm not sure why it is, but we have this tendency to think that if we give our lives over to Christ (like Mary did with Gabriel) our lives will become a life of comfort and convenience and safety. That's not what God promised. God promises to be WITH us in our difficult times and to use our difficult times to build our faith and trust in God. God promises to use our difficult times to help build God's Kingdom... it's truly not about me!

Mary signed up for serving the Kingdom, not for comfort and convenience. Imagine the trip. She is headed from Nazareth, up by the Sea of Galilee (MAP) down to Bethlehem, which is near Jerusalem. It's 80-90 miles. So, I want you to imagine that you are leaving tonight for Downtown Madison ... ON FOOT ... at about 9 months pregnant. By the way, the terrain in Israel would be a lot rougher than between here and Madison.

As a pregnant woman, this walk would take about 4 days. Remember that our Scripture never mentions Mary riding on a donkey... Do you think that Mary is feeling really happy and peaceful and wondrous at this time ... glowing? Mary is walking rough terrain at 9 months pregnant. I think that she is probably experiencing a lot of pain and concern for her unborn child ... not so much a peaceful, calm and serene night.

Mary and Joseph get to Bethlehem and are searching for a place for her to give birth. It may be that no one had room in their homes or inns so a kind person said that they could have the livestock cave to themselves if they needed it. Or, it could be that with so many of Joseph's extended family back in town, there was not better place to be alone for the birth of a child. Either way, let's compare those surroundings with the surroundings women are offered today for childbirth...

If you have not had a baby recently, the places hospitals offer mothers to give birth in have changed a lot even in the last 10 to 15 years. It used to be a labor and delivery room that was pretty clinical. Now, you are offered a birthing suite. I found this online brochure for the Birthing Center at St. Claire's Hospital in . Here's what it says: The Family Birth Center at Saint Clare's Hospital has spacious birthing suites with the comforts of home, plus the technology to meet the needs of mother and newborn, said Shelly Parsells, R.N., BSN, Birth Center manager. "We have the latest technology for

labor beds, which are very comfortable for the mother, and offer more options during delivery. Birthing suites have recliners, entertainment centers with audio and video technology, Internet access, private bath with whirlpool tub and heated tile floors. “Our foremost concern is what’s best for you and your baby. Wow! That makes me want to have a child!

Now, compare that with Mary’s surroundings. Most likely a cave-stable carved into the rock to help keep the animals out of the elements. There would be animals in there. There would be smells in there. No bed. No couch. No whirlpool. No nurses. I’m not even sure if there would have been sheep (in the fields) or cattle “lowing”. It would have been donkeys and/or horses. This was more than likely a 1<sup>st</sup> Century parking garage for the locals. This is not the “calm and bright” that Mary was hoping for...

Let me ask you this ... do you think, as Mary has this baby, that it was a “Silent Night?” I’ve never had a baby myself, but I’ve stood close to a woman who was having a baby 4 times. Any of you ever been with a woman while she is having a baby? Not a whole lot of silence... Please note that I did not ask you women who have had babies what it was like, because I know that as soon as you hold you’re newborn, you forget everything that just happened!

Mary, also, did not have an epidural. If you can picture, women, having a baby in a cave without a bed, without any comforts, without any nurses, with the smell of tired, dirty animals ringing in your nose... This is MARY. THE MARY! She is the one chosen by God to be blessed among women. She is the one that God hand-picked to be the mother of the Son of God. And this is the hardship she has to go through? On this great, history-making joyous occasion, Mary is suffering and hurting and emotional and maybe a little confused, because this night was not turning out the way SHE planned it.

Let me say this for all of us here who think that if we just give our lives to Jesus Christ, we will suddenly have no difficulties or struggles or sufferings in life: Life is a mix of joy and hardship. Life is mountain-top experiences followed by some pretty deep valleys. Our take-away for following Christ is that we know that God is with us through those hardships and that our eternity and the eternity of others are being transformed through those times of suffering. We leave a legacy of being used by God to affect the eternities of the people around us.

Mary suffered, but in those moments God changed history. God changed the world for good through Mary’s struggles. The history of humanity is changed because of Mary’s suffering. Millions of human beings eternities were changed because that child was born in a manger in Bethlehem.

That’s how this works... if we are willing to say to God, “May my life be as You have it planned out”, chances are that we will still struggle in life and suffer; BUT, we also have an opportunity to partner with God to change the world for good!

So, for those of us who are expecting Christmas to be this wonderful, peaceful, serene time that is perfect, you will be disappointed. That’s not what life is like. Christmas happened because life is a struggle. Jesus came to make a difference for us. Christmas was God’s response to the fact that we live in a broken world that is full of darkness and suffering and pain. If life was perfect, God would not have had to send His Son into the world.

Matthew 9:2 = “the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.” John = “LIGHT in the darkness”.

Do you know why we celebrate Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>? It’s not really Jesus’ birth date. We are not sure what that exact date is, but the people of the early church decided to celebrate it in late December because the physical world mirrors the way our lives are. As people who sit in darkness needing light, we love this time of year. It’s the winter solstice. There is a dramatic change in the physical realm. From a couple of days ago and for the next six months our days will be getting longer, brighter, LIGHTER! This mirrors what Jesus offers us in the spiritual realm = a turn from darkness to light...

Mary knew that this birth of the Messiah was going to change everything. But how? What does Jesus do to change everything?

Why would we believe in Jesus and devote time to getting to know Him? Pastor Stan, you just said that I’m still going to have struggles and suffer in this life even if I believe in Him ... then, why would I take the time to follow Jesus?

Jesus does not necessarily change our circumstances, BUT, Jesus offers to be with us in our circumstances. I am not a Christian because I think that God will make me rich. I follow Jesus so that I can feel complete in this life. If we follow Jesus and make effort to grow in our faith, we find out what life is really all about. Jesus shows me Truth and what really matters in life. Jesus helps me to finally figure out what I was made for. I have a sense of completeness because I follow Jesus. I have a hope in this life and for eternity that keeps me going even through the tough times. Jesus gives us strength to handle our life circumstances...

Jesus isn’t about changing our circumstances. Jesus is about changing our attitude and perspective about our circumstances. Life is so much more fulfilling and complete when we figure out that it’s NOT MY BIRTHDAY! I’m not here for me! I’m placed here by God to offer an eternal transformation for other people. I’m here to change the world for good!

This Christmas, I want you to see the four gifts that Jesus offers us... If we are willing to follow Jesus, there will be more to life than you can imagine.

## **I. God’s Way**

- A. “I am the way, the truth and the life...” Jesus offers us a new way to live! Early Christians did not call themselves “Christians”; they called themselves “Followers of the Way”. They believed that Jesus offered a completely different way to live than what the world was telling them.
- B. “Unto you is born in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the LORD”. The word “Lord” means just what it says ... someone you would bow to and do exactly what they say. They are the Master. You will follow them no matter what.
- C. Jesus teachings were pretty radical in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century and they still are today. The teachings of Jesus go against the grain of what our society tells us...
  1. World = self-indulgence; Jesus = self-denial (It’s not about me!)
  2. World = seek self-glory; Jesus = seek God’s glory

3. World = seek greatness and praise and accolades for yourself; Jesus = greatness is serving others and not expecting praise for it!
  4. World = pursue riches; Jesus = our lives are not measured by our possessions.
  5. World = demand justice; Jesus = show MERCY (70X7?)
- D. “Those who pursue this life will lose it, but those who lay down their lives for my sake will save it”. This means that when we live life God’s way, we find a fulfilling life that we never expected.
- E. Do you know what we are experiencing here at BMZ? We are figuring out that we really start living when we live life GOD’S WAY... Jesus said that we are to serve “The Least of These” and then we could really experience life:
1. As we serve food pantries at Boscobel and Gays Mills, guess who really experiences life?
  2. As we purchase and give gifts to people in our area, guess who really experiences life?
  3. As we go on mission trips to help people who may not be in a position to help themselves right now, guess who really experiences life?
  4. God’s Way = helps us understand what we were made for!
- F. I follow Jesus because by following Jesus I find out what it’s like to be authentically human ... who God made me to be!
- G. Gift #1 = God’s Way ... MERRY CHRISTMAS!

## II. **God’s Love**

- A. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Gift is expressed in one of the most popular scriptures ever ... it even shows up on signs at football games! “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that whoever believed in Him would not die but live forever!”
1. That’s the Christmas story. God gave us His Son to live and die here on earth. God did not have to give His own Son over to us to live and suffer and die ... God CHOSE to.
  2. Why? Because God loves us ... me and YOU!
- B. I have probably learned more about God from being a father myself than I ever learned in Seminary or from a textbook. I think being a father helps me understand what it must be like for God to be our heavenly Father.
1. As a father, I love my four daughters so much. I would lay down my life for any one of them in a moment.
  2. I want to love them and for them to know that I love them.
  3. I want to be in a relationship with them so much. I want to talk with them and laugh with them and be there for them when they need to cry.
  4. I love my 4 girls.
- C. This gives me a picture of what God wants from each one of us ... a relationship. God’s heart swells for each one of us. God loves us no

matter what we've done. Most of us parents will never give up on our kids, no matter how messed up they get, we will be there for them and encourage them to do life better.

- D. This is what God is like. Not just a faceless higher power in the universe, but a compassionate Father that knows your name and cares deeply about your daily life. A Father that wants the very best for you here and for eternity.
- E. As a Father, I do crazy things for the sake of my kids. We give and give and give to them even if they are not appreciative... you know why? Because we love them and want to be in relationship with them and bless them and make their lives better.
- F. God showed us through Jesus what that love looks like. Jesus loved the people around him even though the rest of society did not. Jesus showed God's love to be the type that heals and feeds and teaches to improve life and opens up his arms to welcome home the son that left and made bad choices in life. God is Love!
- G. I follow Jesus because I see in Jesus the love of God. I know that no matter what happens in my life and no matter who turns their back on me and rejects me, there is One who will never leave me behind...
- H. Gift # 2 = God's Love ... MERRY CHRISTMAS!

### III. God's Mercy and Forgiveness

- A. When Mary and Joseph each had their separate encounters with Gabriel, the messenger of God, they both heard that they were to name the baby, "Jesus". They both knew that the baby would be a boy and that they were to name him "Jeshua" in Hebrew. "Jesus"; meaning "God Saves".
- B. Jesus came to save us from our 'sins'. Sins being those things that are not of God. Why do we need forgiveness and mercy? God cannot be by sinful people. God is holy. In order to be in a relationship with God, we have to have our sins removed.
- C. That's why Jesus came ... as a sin remover! God loved us so much that He offered His only Son to come and remove our sins. The method for doing that was Jesus dying on a cross (someone has to pay the price for sin ... "wages of sin is death") in our place. Our part? Our part is to ask for forgiveness from God ... to truly be sorry for what we've done that was not Godly ... to truly be sorry for how we've hurt God's other kids.
- D. Through God's Mercy and Forgiveness, we have hope for a full life here like God has planned, and an eternity in God's Paradise.
- E. Here's the deal: Let me be clear here. You are not HOPELESS! No matter what you've done in your past or what you are doing right now, God's forgiveness and mercy (not getting what we deserve) are available to you. You still have hope for a great life here and an eternity in Paradise! God is the God of 2<sup>nd</sup> Chances...
- F. Gift #3 = God's Mercy and Forgiveness ... MERRY CHRISTMAS!

### IV. God's Hope

- A. Even when life is full of suffering, God offers us hope.
- B. I am a follower of Jesus because He is the only one who pierces the incredible darkness that this world sometimes throws at us.
  1. Some of you tonight have lost a close family member or loved one this past year ... maybe this is your first year without them at your family Christmas table and/or celebration.
  2. Maybe you, or a loved one, are dealing with cancer or some other illness.
  3. Maybe you are dealing with a relationship that is or has fallen apart or not turned out like you hoped or planned.
  4. Maybe you have lost your job or the economy has you on the ropes.
  5. Maybe you are experiencing depression this holiday season and you cannot even put your finger on why.
- C. I am a follower of Jesus Christ because even in all that life throws at us, Jesus says, "I've still got you." Whether healing comes in this life as we live the way God calls us to or if we have to wait until the next life, God has a plan for you and it's better than yours. God has a plan for me and it's better than mine.
- D. In all the craziness and chaos of this world, God offers you and me HOPE. MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Let's get back to Mary. If you have never been there when a baby was born, there are weird moments in time around the birth of a child. There's kind of an electricity in the air before the baby is ready to be delivered. It's calm, but there is an incredibly anticipation for what is about to happen.

When it's time to deliver, the delivery suite gets very loud and there are a lot of people (nurses, doctors, assistants) running in and out of the room and hustling around and doing their jobs. For the birth mom and the dad they are trying to help each other through the steps to give birth, there are words sometimes said by the mother that should not be repeated and that the husband should try to forget.

Then, after the baby is born and has been cleaned up and measured and weighed and checked over, there is an incredible peace in the room. There is a realization for the mom that the last nine months were somehow worth it as she stares down at her newborn. There is a connection for the whole family around that new little squishy ball of life.

And so, there was Mary ... the shepherds had left, Joseph was probably asleep ... and Mary had some moments alone with the baby Jesus. In those moments it came: all was calm and all was bright. Finally, after all those months of being ridiculed for her pregnancy outside of marriage... finally, after all those days of traveling and then giving birth ... a silent, peaceful night.

So, here's the deal: I believe that God desires for each one of us a Peace that passes understanding. I believe that as we follow God's Way, experience God's Love and Mercy and Forgiveness and as we count on the Hope that we are offered through Christ, that we too can have peace in our lives.

But, there's more. I also believe that we are not to keep it to ourselves. One of the ways that we experience these things is by understanding that we are here to pass this on to others. We are to be light in this world for people who are in darkness... Jesus said that what we do for "the least of these" we do for Him. It's Jesus' Birthday this Christmas, not ours...

Last year we asked you all to help with a couple of projects for orphans in India (school uniforms) and Cambodia (water tank and pump). I want you to see what you helped accomplish for "the least of these".

(SHOW VIDEO)

This year, we have been asked to help rescue 100 children in 5 countries; Cambodia, India, Bosnia, Croatia and St. Vincent. Children who are in places no child should be ... child labor, brothels, drug rings. It takes money for informants and to pay off the "owners" of these children. We are selling T-SHIRTS for \$50 to help. Can't do it on your own = pledge sheet. We will continue to take donations for this into 2010.

Merry Christmas Everyone! Keep being Light in the Darkness!

Let's Pray!!