

Theology for Third Graders on the Cusp of Christmas

Colleagues,

The congregation I serve is one of the very few in the ELCA that operates an elementary school. It's a legacy of our roots in the LCMS, one for which we continue to thank God. Of late we see it emerging more and more as a mission field, in sharp distinction to an older identity as the fold in which thoughtful Lutheran parents could keep their little lambs safe from the wolves that roam in public places. Time was, and not so long ago, when two thirds of the families with children enrolled were members of the congregation. In this year's kindergarten class, the proportion is 10 percent. I have an inkling that, for several of these families, Messiah School is the sole point of connection with the story of Jesus and the Gospel that erupts when this story is faithfully told as font and source of God's promises today.

This puts pressure on those of us tasked to convey the promises, whether as teachers in the classroom or as that old guy in the omnipresent black shirt, sometimes with a funny collar, sometimes not, who wafts mysteriously through the school hallways from time to time. With many of the children, the chances to tell the story are fewer than they used to be. Church is not something that mom and dad will take them to, not even at Christmas. So when the school comes together, as it did yesterday afternoon, to launch the Christmas break with a chapel service, one aims to make as much of it as possible within the strict restraints of the time available before the school buses show up.

Today I pass along what those children at Messiah School were

doused in yesterday. Eighth grade students did the dousing, from lectern and pulpit. The format was a little service of lessons and carols, arranged by the principal, who twisted the pastor's arm to compose a brief reflection on each of the lessons, emphasis on "brief." The eighth graders took turns reading first the lesson, then the ensuing reflection, each set followed by stanzas of a Christmas carol that the students had picked to match it.

This will be thin gruel for all of you unless you approach it from the point of the view of the thoughtful critic who wonders how she or he might tackle a similar assignment. You are talking to children. You take them with utmost seriousness as foci of God's attention and love. You assume going in that God has some good news designed precisely for them in the particularity of their momentary situation as seven or eight or nine year old Americans of the early 21st century. You have a thick, rich, adult-sized text, and half a minute in which to draw from it a promise the children are able to hear and find comfort in. How indeed does one go at it, if not with these children, then with one's own children or grandchildren?

And for those of you with the nerve and time to tackle this, how might you counsel the undersigned pastor and grandfather to improve on his work next time around, the task being to think as a theologian for the sake of touting Christ and his benefits to a third-grader? Yes, I will welcome responses.

One last thing: since you doubtless popped this post open looking for grownup fare, I pass along a Christmas present that popped up in my Facebook feed yesterday morning, via Valparaiso University's *The Cresset*. It's a reprint, in the current issue, of a 75 year-old essay by O. P. Kretzmann, Valparaiso's legendary president of mid-century past. The title is "[Bethlehem and 1941](#)." That it manages so well to channel good news to

readers in 2016 is at once chilling and wondrous.

Christus natus est. Peace. Joy. Merry Christmas!

Jerry Burce

A Brief Service of Lessons and Carols

Messiah Lutheran School, Fairview Park, Ohio

21 December 2016

(Hymnal: *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*)

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First Reading: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,

establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.

Commentary and Prayer—

Too many children wake up every morning in hard and dangerous places. The grownups in charge are not good people. They fight with each other. They don't bother to be kind, or try to be fair. Yes, they look after their own children; they'll even do it well. But if someone else's little boy or girl is hurt or hungry, they shrug their shoulders. They'll even laugh about it.

This is not what God wants. That's why God promised long ago to put someone in charge who is good enough, and wise enough, and strong enough to make things right for all God's children, no matter who they are or where they live. God started to keep that promise when Jesus was born. The day is coming when everyone will know him as King Jesus, and every little girl or boy will be safe and well and happy.

We pray. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and finish the work you were born to do. And even today, hold all of us in your care and love. Amen.

Hymn: What Child is This? (296; v. 1-2)

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Second Reading: Micah 5:2-5

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,

whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”

Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when she who is in labor bears a son,
and the rest of his brothers return
to join the Israelites.

He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.

And he will be our peace.

Commentary and Prayer—

Great people sometimes come from unexpected places. Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin in the forests of Kentucky. Martin Luther grew up in a little German town that no one would want to visit. The greatest person ever entered the world in Bethlehem, a tiny village that nobody paid attention to at all.

God arranged it this way. All through the Bible we see how God likes to surprise people. Sometime God *needs* to surprise people. Otherwise we'd start to think we were just as smart as he is. How silly would that be? Still, people keep imagining that, and when they do, they turn into terrible people.

So to save us from being terrible, God put his baby Jesus in a place where no else would dream of looking. Today our grownup Savior is still in places—so many places—that smart people ignore. Our school is one of them.

We pray: *Open our eyes, dear Jesus, to see how you are with us in our classrooms and hallways, and also in our homes; and wherever you find us, hold us in your love and power. Amen.*

Hymn: 0 Little Town of Bethlehem (279; v. 1, 3, 4)

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Third Reading: Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Commentary and Prayer—

We call them refugees, or immigrants, or foreigners. We even dare to call them aliens. These are people who will be trying their best to sleep tonight in tents or train stations, in bouncing trucks or in open, rickety boats. They've been forced to leave their homes. They don't know where they are going, or what they will find when they arrive. Every day they meet people who are scared of them and treat them badly. They wonder if they matter to anybody at all.

When Jesus was born he was one of these people. God put his own dear boy into this great river of refugees because even these people—especially these people—matter so very much to God. You matter to God too, especially when you feel lost and forgotten and so very, very small.

We pray: *Lord Jesus, watch over every child who is traveling in strange places today, maybe with their parents and maybe not; and please find a way to let them know how much they matter to you.*

Hymn: Away in a Manger (277; v. 1-3)

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Fourth Reading: Luke 2:8-14

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

Commentary and Prayer—

Those shepherds were not nice men. They weren't very clean either. We can be sure that as they sat together in the dark they were saying things that you and I would be punished for. No wonder their teeth started to chatter when the light went on and God's angel appeared. They knew what they deserved. They expected to get it.

Instead they hear, “Don't be afraid.” God wants all his children

to hear that this Christmas, beginning with the ones who ought to be afraid, and know it. The shepherds aren't the only ones who have a Savior. Each us of us has Jesus too. He was born to get what we deserve so that we don't have it get it.

We pray: Dear Jesus, help us understand this Christmas how badly we need you; and when this starts to sink in, tell us once again not to be afraid. Then help us believe our ears so that we sing with joy, like those angels in the sky. Amen.

Hymn: The First Noel (300; 1, 2, 4)

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Fifth Reading: Luke 2:15-20

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Commentary and Prayer—

So the shepherds went rushing to Bethlehem to check things out, and much to their surprise, the shepherds found what they had been told to find. There was Mary, there was Joseph. Above all, there was the baby, and because all eyes were on the baby, nobody complained about these rough, smelly strangers who crowded in to see the baby too.

Even today, whenever people keep their eyes on Jesus, they stop complaining about the other people around them. Instead they thank God for those other people. They start thanking God that Jesus was born for everyone, even shepherds; even people we usually don't like very much.

No wonder the shepherds were praising God when they back to their fields.

We pray: Lord Jesus, fill us with such happiness in you this Christmas, that we will love each other as you have loved us all. Amen.

Hymn: Angels We Have Heard on High (289; v. 1-3)

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Sixth Reading: John 1:1-5, 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Commentary and Prayer—

Imagine a night when all the lights go out, all over Cleveland. It happened some years ago, before some of us were born. It took four or five days before the lights came on again. By then all the cellphones were dead, and so were the flashlights. The nights were very dark, and little children were scared.

Now imagine a light that never goes out. However dark it gets, however long the darkness lasts, the light still shines, and shines, and shines some more. It helps the little children feel safe. It comforts their parents, and makes them strong.

Jesus is this light for all of us. No darkness is long enough or deep enough to stop him from shining. His disciples learned that on Easter. It's our turn this Christmas to learn it too.

We pray: Lord Jesus, you were born to be our light, shining with the love of God for us all. Keep our eyes always on you, so that even when every other light goes out, we will still be glad and full of hope. Amen.

Hymn: O Come, All Ye Faithful (283; v. 1-3)

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Seventh Reading: Philippians 2:5-11

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Commentary and Prayer—

What eighth grader would spend all her time hanging out with

second graders? Why would she? Second graders are so far beneath her. She needs to spend her time with the important kids.

Of course it's not just eighth graders who think like that. Grownups are that way too. All of them, with one exception. His name is Jesus.

This Christmas we remember how God sent his Son to hang out with all the nobodies who fill the world. Refugees. Shepherds. Second graders. Eighth graders. Teachers and pastors and mommies and daddies. Even mighty Caesar in far away Rome is nothing more than a tiny ant where God is concerned. Yet here comes Jesus to spend his time—with us. He treats us all like “the important kids.” Through his great and everlasting love, he turns us all into the children of God Most High.

We pray: Lord Jesus, help us to look at each other with the eyes of your heart. Show us how precious we are to God—not some of us, but all of us. Then lead us in all our days to walk in this light, to the honor and glory of your holy name. Amen.

Hymn: Go Tell It on the Mountain (290; v. 1-3)