

Christmas Eve 2017
St. Brendan's Anglican Church
Rev. Doug Floyd

When the night was half spent,

He came down.

In the fullness of time,

He came down.

The only Son of God

He came down.

Eternally begotten of the Father

He came down.

God from God, True Light from True Light

He came down

True God from True God

He came down

Through him all things were made

And for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

He came to make His blessings flow, far as the curse is found.

St. John Chrysostom tells us, to “consider how great it was to hear and learn that God, the indescribable, the imperishable, the unfathomable, the invisible, the incomprehensible ... He who surpasses every mind and overcomes every thought, who surpasses angels, archangels, all the spiritual powers above, He undertook to become a man, and to receive the flesh which was formed from earth and clay.

The creed reminds us that he came down for our salvation. He came to redeem us from our sins and deliver us from the power of the evil one. St. Athanasius emphasizes that just as the world

was created in and through the Son, the world must be redeemed in and through the Son. Salvation includes not only the idea of redemption from sin, but the freedom to enter into the communion of love between Father, Son, and Spirit.

Years ago, Amy Grant sang, “Love has come for the world to know.” In one sense this captures a big idea among many church fathers. Many of the Fathers acknowledge he has come down for this love, this great communion.

Gregory the Theologian writes, “The one who enriches becomes poor; he is made poor in my flesh, that I might be enriched through his divinity. The full one empties himself; for he empties himself of his own glory for a short time, that I may participate in his fullness.”

Isaac the Syrian emphasizes the revealing of God’s love. When speaking of the Incarnation and the cross he writes, “God did all this for no other reason than to manifest his love to the world, the love that he possesses. His goal was so that when we come to know it, our love might grow within us and we might be captives of his love.” This communion extends to all creation, he continues, :...through his beautiful visage and love, the whole universe was drawn to a united confession of God, the Lord of all, and the knowledge of the one Creator was sown in every person.”

Maximus the Confessor sees the Incarnation as the focal point of all history, leading the cosmos into communion. He writes, “The Logos, by essence God, became a messenger of this plan when he became a man and, if I may rightly say so, established himself as the innermost depth of the Father’s goodness while also displaying in himself the very goal for which his creature manifestly received the beginning of their existence. Because of Christ..all the ages of times and the beings within those ages have received their beginning and end in Christ.”

We focus on the glorious mystery unveiled in the birth of Jesus, the unveiling of God’s image and love for all to see, to know, to participate in. In today’s Gospel, we see the hand of God preparing a place for the coming of the Son. The revealing of love unbound in the binding of a little babe. In our reading, we meet Caesar, Joseph and Mary, the Inn, the Shepherds, and a host of Angels.

The birth of Jesus is not a timeless tale teaching ageless truths. It is an event in the history of the world at a specific place and time. Luke mentions the Caesar and the Governor. Under Caesar’s rule, the whole world, the ecumene, has been united under one rule. The Caesar was considered the Prince of Peace. He was called the Savior of the world. An inscription from 9 BC says that the day of the Emperor’s birth “gave the whole world a new aspect. It would have fallen into ruin had not a widespread well-being shone forth through him, the one now born ... Providence, which has ordered all things, filled this man with virtue that he might benefit mankind, sending him as a Saviour (sōtēr) both for us and our descendants ... The birthday of the god was the beginning of the good tidings that he brought for the world. From his birth, a new reckoning of

time must begin”¹ Caesar could never fulfill this role, but he is part of the mystery of God’s unfolding plan.

The Caesar orders all the world to be registered, and in so doing he serves the purposes of the true Emperor, the true Sovereign, the Lord of Time and Space. For the true Prince of Peace and Savior of the world is to be born in Bethlehem. As Micah tells us,

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
 who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
 one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
 from ancient days.

³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time
 when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return
 to the people of Israel.

⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
 in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
 to the ends of the earth.

⁵ And he shall be their peace. (Mic 5:2–5)

And the roads of Rome lead to and from Bethlehem. For they will eventually become the highway to bring the Good News of this King, Lord, Savior, and Prince of Peace to be declared all across the empire. In this brief story, we see how the hand of God has been and continues to be working in people and events that are often at odds with His ultimate rule.

This world was created to reveal the Father’s love in every mountain and every valley, in the sun and moon, in the seas and rivers, in the cold and chill, in the dew and rain, in the fire and heat. All the birds of the air and beasts of the field were created to bless the Lord, revealing His love in every moment and every movement. In turning away from the Lord, humans could no longer see or hear this grand symphony of creation. They planted cities of violence and cultures of oppression.

²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (Kindle Locations 723-727). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Ro 1:21–25)

Nonetheless, his purposes cannot be thwarted. The prophets reveal the unseen hand of God at work in every nation in the rising and falling of rulers, and in the hope that pulses in the human heart. In the fullness of time, He will bring all things in subjection to His Son, Jesus the Christ.

Caesar summons the world to be registered even as the Lord of Glory is summoning Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem to fulfill His purposes. Joseph and Mary walk in the way of the Lord, in the path He has prepared for them. Mary has already heard the word of favor from Gabriel,

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (Lk 1:30–33)

Mary yields to the favor of God, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (Lk 1:38). And the Holy Spirit comes upon her, and the power of the Most High overshadows her; and the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. (Lk 1:35.)

Joseph has already heard the word of promise and assurance from the angel who speaks in his dreams.

²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Mt 1:20–25).

Now as they heed the call of Caesar to be registered, they follow the call of the Father into Bethlehem, the city of David, the birthplace of the King of all Kings.

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!

Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.

Luke tells us that when the time came for her to give birth there was no room in the inn, so she gave birth to her firstborn son and laid him in a manger. We usually focus on the innkeeper providing no room. But actually there was no room in the world. John tells us that He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (Jn 1:11). The human world in rebellion and blindness could not grasp, contain, hold, or even welcome the true source of all power. There is simply no room for Him in all creation. He is greater than all existence, and yet He came down.

[T]hough he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Php 2:6–7). He humbled Himself under the mighty hand of the Father, who would lift Him up in due time. His humbling birth foreshadows His humbling death. Birth and death bound together in the perfect image of Love.

Mary places the baby in a manger, a feeding trough. St. Maximus says that, “In the manger, where the food of animals is placed, he allowed his limbs to be laid, thereby showing that his own body would be the eternal food of men.”² He is the bread from heaven. The Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” (Jn 6:32–33).

The shepherds watch over their flock in the dark. Half spent was the night. The whole world lies in darkness. “Long lay the world in sin and error pining.” The shepherds remind us of our Advent journey. We’ve been watching and waiting in darkness. Like the five wise virgins, the shepherds are watching, are alert as they watch their sheep in the dark.

Into the dark, a light shines. O night divine. The angel of the Lord appears and glory shone around. Bringing good news of great joy to these weary shepherds, The angel proclaims, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Lk 2:10–11.

The King has come. He came down. For us and for our salvation, He came down.

Suddenly the darkness gives way to unfurling light as a host of angels, praise God saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Lk 2:14).

The Lord is pleased to reveal His love, His peace, His shalom in His world. He is pleased to heal and restore and lead His people into love. The shepherds make haste to behold that which the Lord has made known. They behold Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, the Lamb of God. They behold that

² Alphonsus Liguori, *The Incarnation, Birth and Infancy of Jesus Christ; Or, The Mysteries of the Faith*, ed. Eugene Grimm, The Complete Works of Saint Alphonsus de Liguori (New York; Cincinnati; St. Louis; London; Dublin: Benziger Brothers; R. Washbourne; M. H. Gill & Son, 1887), 239.

which the Lord has done. The shepherds become the first evangelists of this good news. Luke writes, “And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.” (Lk 2:16–17). They behold the glory of God in Jesus and become living witnesses of the work of God. To behold the love of God in Christ is to be transformed by that same love.

The Son of God came down to reveal the Love of God, to restore our eyes and ears and hearts, so that we might behold Him in all His glory, that we might know His love. ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant us to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in our inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith—that we, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph 3:16–19).

He came down that a deluge of love might drown us all.

Like Mary, we must pause, behold and treasure these things our hearts. And like the shepherds our response to such good news of great joy is to glorify and praise God for all that we have seen and heard in coming of the Son God, in our Savior Jesus Christ. In the child who would be the King who pour out His life even to the point of death, death on the cross. He would descend into our humanity that He might raise our humanity up into the Love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And finally, like the angels, we go forth as flaming messengers with the love of God burning in our hearts and the word of Grace burning in our lips. May we reveal the Good News of His coming and redeeming in all we say and do.