

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
December 24, 2021
Christmas Eve

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, Friends and guests, here we are...Christmas Eve.

We've made it. We have traversed another shopping season...

We have come through another Advent season... and we have arrived at the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

We have made it.

All the preparations for our Christmas observance have been taken care of, hopefully.

All the preparations have been made and we are here.

We have arrived at the big day.

And now that we are here, we can look back and we can think about the question, "How did we get here?"

How did we get here?

PAUSE

Now, perhaps, we would answer that question, saying, "Well, I got in my car, started the ignition, drove along some roads, and here I am."

"It's not rocket science, Pastor. This is how I always get to church, and it was no different tonight."

No doubt, most people in church this evening across this country have arrived or will arrive in church in the same way.

A few may have had more involved journeys say by plane or train, especially if they are visiting friends and family out of town, and are attending a church other than their home church.

And, hopefully, no one will have as difficult a time getting to church as Steve Martin and John Candy in that wonderful movie classic *Planes, Train, and Automobiles*.

Hopefully, no one has had to hop a flight, take a taxi, get a lift in a pickup, then take a train, sit on a bus, rent a car, bum a ride on tractor trailer, and then ride the El, only to get to church this evening.

Hopefully, no one has had such trials.

But, nonetheless the question is still important, "How did we get here this evening?"

PAUSE

Now maybe some of us will interpret this question, will see this question differently.

Maybe some of us would say that in order to arrive at this evening, we have had to prepare lists.

That we have had to purchase presents, and to wrap those presents.

That we have had to go to grocery store, and get the fixings for the Christmas dinner.

That we have had to buy Christmas cards, sign them, address them, and mail them out.

That we have had to decorate our home.

That we have had to buy a Christmas tree, and hang ornaments, and put up lights.

That we have had to do all those things which make Christmas "Christmas."

Yes, this is another way to answer that question, "How did we get here this evening?"

PAUSE

But aside from speaking about how we physically got here to this Christmas Eve service this evening...

And aside from speaking about how we prepared for our Christmas Day celebration at home...

Aside from those answers, I want us to think about this question, “How did we get here this evening?” in still another way.

I want us to think about this question from the perspective of Mary, the Mother of Our Lord.

PAUSE

For when shepherds arrive at the place of Jesus’ birth, and share with Mary and Joseph what had been told them about Jesus, the text says, “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”

Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Mary pondered the shepherd’s words in her heart.

Mary turned these words over in her heart.

Mary questioned the import of these words.

In short, when ruminating on the shepherd’s words, I think Mary was really wondering, “How did I get here this evening?”

“How did I come to be in Bethlehem, in a stable for animals, giving birth to the Son of God?”

“How did I come to be here listening to these shepherds who have come here so as to tell me these amazing things about angels and the birth of a Savior?”

Yes, I think when we hear that Mary treasured all the words of the shepherds and pondered them in her heart that in truth she was wondering, “How did I get here this evening?”

PAUSE

Now, of course, Mary and Joseph came to be in Bethlehem by way of foot, for in that time, there were no taxis, nor Ubers, nor trains, planes, or automobiles.

Indeed they would have walked from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a distance of some 90 miles, a trip which may have taken as much as 5 days or more.

And, hopefully, they made use of pack animals, so Mary need not have walked all that distance.

Indeed as pregnant as Mary was, she probably rode to Bethlehem on the back of a donkey or mule.

And how the holy family came to be in Bethlehem is by way of a census being taken at that time.

The census was for the purpose of registering people for taxes.

That is how Mary came to be in Bethlehem, in a stable, because there was no room in the inn.

That is how Mary came to be giving birth to Jesus in that place at that time.

PAUSE

But I suspect, the question, "How did I get here?" in Mary's mind was not a question about her physical journey.

No, I suspect this is not what the Mother of our Lord was thinking about in that stable.

Instead, I suspect what Mary was thinking about the grace of God.

For it was only by the grace of God that Mary came to be in Bethlehem, in a stable, giving birth to the Son of God.

It was only by the grace of God that shepherds arrived in that stable with news of an angelic host announcing the birth of a Savior.

It was only by the grace of God that God had fulfilled his promise of a long expected Messiah.

It was only by the grace of God that the birth of Jesus took place as it did, when it did, where it did.

Only by the grace of God.

And, I also suspect that Mary's ponderings about her faith story that led her to Bethlehem...

I also suspect that Mary's ponderings about her faith story are meant to trigger our ponderings about our collective faith story.

Yes, to be sure, Mary's quiet reflections in this text are meant to make us stop and think, too.

Mary must be thinking, "How did I get here—in Bethlehem, in a stable, with shepherds, and with a child?"

And that is the same question we are all meant to ask ourselves, "How did we get here in church, in Harrisburg, hearing the news again of Jesus' birth?"

How did we get here in this moment of time? But by God's grace.

PAUSE

Think about it like this...God's plan has been unfurling for centuries.

And that plan spans all of human history...

And that plan of God, that plan for all creation pivoted, God's plan shifted with the birth of Jesus.

That is the thought that must have been occupying Mary's mind.

How did I, and how did we all get here tonight?

PAUSE

Now, at the dawn of history, there had been God's good creation. It was grace that God created all that we know.

But then, of course, sin entered the world, and that threw a huge monkey wrench into God's plan.

And so God sent prophets proclaiming the coming of a Messiah.

And so God sent an angel to Mary announcing to her that she would conceive and bear a son.

And so God sent shepherds to go to Bethlehem to see God's plan being set aright once more with the birth of a Savior, the birth of Jesus who came so as to suffer and die on the cross to bring about God's redemption.

Yes, the trajectory of creation pivoted, the future of creation shifted with the birth of Jesus.

Yes, God's plan for the good of creation and for humanity was restored that first Christmas eve.

Mary gives birth to a Savior, fulfilling what was long promised of old, and here we are, set right again along God's plan.

And here we are experiencing that good news again this night.

How we got here this evening in this moment of time—only, ONLY by God's grace.

PAUSE

And the question then we need to ask next is "Where do we go from here?"

Where do we go from here?

Well, we go home, of course. And we then will go back to our regular lives.

After the holidays, we go back to work. Or, we go back to school.

We go back to our communities, to our daily activities, to the things which occupy our time.

Just like the shepherds in our story who return to their labors.

But notice the change that has taken place in the shepherds.

Notice that the text says, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen."

The shepherds are not the same shepherds who had been out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night.

The shepherds had been touched by God's grace, and they were no longer the same.

PAUSE

And that, Friends, is the message I want you to go home with tonight, and to go with in the days to come.

I want us to understand that we have been touched by grace.

How we came to be in worship together tonight is by God's grace.

God called us together, like he did the shepherds long ago...

God called us together so that we might be touched by the miracle of Christ's birth, so that we would understand the powerful grace of God that has been stirring and working and empowering forward history for as long as there has been history...

God's grace is the constant undercurrent propelling the world forward, and that grace is most powerfully seen in the gift of God's Son who bring us and creation new life by a cross.

We came here tonight by God's grace, and leave here tonight enveloped in God's grace.

God's grace is always lovingly embracing us to carry us through the trials and tribulations we face in life.

God's grace is always lovingly uplifting us so as to experience blessings and goodness.

God's grace is always with us even when we come to the end of this life, and we are suddenly standing before God the Father wondering, "How did I get here?"

To which God will answer, "By grace. By grace. By grace."

And so, I wish you all a very merry Christmas, as we give thanks to God for bringing us here in church to be touched again by the grace in his Son...

And as we also give thanks to God for bringing us here, this far along our journey by grace, we remember that we go forth in grace, that we go forth to share God's grace.

And we rejoice, we rejoice because grace will lead us home.

Merry Christmas then because God's gift of grace is bestowed upon all people this night.

Merry Christmas.