

## **Christmas 2020** **St. Patrick – Milford**

One of my favorite things about hearing the Luke version of Christmas story is that it brings real warmth and hopefulness into our lives ... 2 things that the world desperately needs right now.

There are so many little twists and turns in the story. Joseph and Mary must travel to Bethlehem for a census-taking. This sets them up for Jesus to be born in the city of David, Bethlehem! Shepherds are simply tending their flocks nearby. They have a fearful but wondrous heavenly experience. They gain hope in the midst of their fear! Mary gets to see others confirm what she had been told by the Angel Gabriel... her baby... this child Jesus is special—her child is the hope of the world!

For me, the important question for this Christmas ... a Covid-Christmas ... is: how does the cherished story of Christmas translate from the pages of the Bible to our life during a world pandemic? Obviously, this Christmas is not what many of us have ever grown to expect. At the heart of our Christmases our whole life-long has been that Christmas must involve a gathering ... a nearness—to friends and family, face to face. God himself came near to us that first Christmas. Isaiah prophesied that the world would see him and ... “call his name Immanuel” ... meaning God with us. How can we keep Christmas—when God himself came to us face to face—by keeping our distance from each other?

I think that this year Christmas could be our long-overdue chance to consider how unexpected that first Christmas was. This year, the tenor of Christmas is more in tune with the surprising twists and turns of that first Christmas rather than the ideals of our own Christmas pasts.

Remember how long God’s chosen people had waited. It had been 1,000 years since the great King David, and God’s promise to raise up a ruler from his lineage who would establish his throne forever. It had been 7 centuries since Isaiah prophesied a virgin with child would give birth to a son given with the government on his shoulders. They would call him: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. No one thought it would be so many centuries of waiting after this Messiah has been promised.

This birth would all take place in the middle of nowhere ... and to an unwed young woman, after all. Isaiah’s prophecy notwithstanding ... virgins don’t have children. The ancients knew this every bit as well as we do today. And what of God ... moving literally the whole “known world” of the time ... with a decree from Caesar Augustus, to get Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to David’s town of Bethlehem at precisely the time she would give birth, to fulfill the words of prophets?

None would have expected that upon their arrival, there would be “no place to stay” for Joseph and Mary and her holy child except for a stable and a manger. For King David’s heir ... there would be “no room” when we might expect a palace! And how could he be born to a couple (poor enough) to be only able to offer two -turtledoves instead of a young/wooly lamb in the Temple? Would such a child, so long expected, not soon be surrounded by the nation’s greatest dignitaries? Instead, the angel visits many shepherds and directs them to the stable.

It can be all too easy to become all too familiar with the world-changing force of that first Christmas—a force that didn't come according to human expectations. Perhaps we've been rocked to sleep by our annual routines and December's strange mixture of the church's story and the world's celebration. But now Christmas 2020 is different. I suggest that this unexpected Christmas gives us more reason to be hopeful than disillusioned. Maybe the very thing that would best reintroduce us to what Christmas really means ... is to have a Christmas that doesn't fall easily into what we've come to expect.

Into the darkness comes the Savior, the healer, the mender of souls, the reconciler, the Creator, the Messiah, the Lord. The Angel told the shepherds their sign would be to find the child wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger.

This sign was a humble reminder of God's embrace of all people ... healing and sick ... rich and poor. In the midst of the darkness we turn to light. We embrace God's love in our actions and our love of others. We overcome our fears with our care and our love. LOVE transforms the world.

The Good News that Jesus brings us on this most holy night (day) is the message of God's love. Jesus was born to proclaim to ALL God's salvation. We are to see, in that Christ child ... the Prince of Peace ... the reality of reconciliation and renewal with God.

So, on this Holy night (Day), in the darkness and gloom of our anxieties and fears, in the shadows of the world's pandemic, let's rejoice in the light of God's closeness to each of us ... which is the true meaning of Christmas.

*Merry Christmas!*