

Martin Luther's Christmas Sermon

(a compilation by church historian Roland Bainton)

Martin Luther was the man God used to spark the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's. As a young man, Luther had done his best to justify himself by his works, but never found peace with God until the Lord touched his heart with Romans 1:17 (which quotes Habakkuk 2:4) "The just shall live by his FAITH". Luther became a mighty preacher and writer – often times very plain spoken (in fact, he said many things that you all would probably throw me out of this pulpit for saying – but I am going to avoid that tonight by not mentioning what those are!)

The following "message" was never preached in one setting by Martin Luther. Rather this is a compilation of things that Luther taught from the different Christmas passages in Matthew and Luke. As you will see, he sometimes "filled in the blanks" in the account with his opinions or imagination. I'll let you sift through the good and the bad here. But there are also some GREAT applications that I hope you'll let God speak to your heart about, through "Martin Luther's Christmas Sermon"!

The story begins with the angels, because when God needs to deliver a message, he sends his angels. For this message, God chose the Angel Gabriel. Now Gabriel was the commander in chief of all the hosts of heaven, and he had legions of angels at his command. I think Gabriel must have been surprised when God asked him to go as an errand boy to a simple maid in Nazareth.

Her name was Mary. I think she was probably an orphan. Of course we hear the legend that her father was Joachim, and her mother Anna, and that they were wealthy, but there's not a word about that in the Biblical account. I think she was probably an orphan girl of about thirteen years old, and that she was entrusted to Joseph for custody.

It was to this girl that the Angel Gabriel brought a message. And what was Mary doing when the angel came to her? Usually in the pictures she is portrayed as reading, and that's wholesome, but I wouldn't be surprised if she was doing the chores.

And the angel said to her, "Dear Mary, you are more blessed than any woman that ever lived or ever shall live. For you shall bear a child, and you shall call his name Jesus. And he shall sit upon the throne of his father David, and of his kingdom there shall be no end."

Mary was flesh and blood. She said, "How can these things be?" And Gabriel said, "You've asked too big a one for me, Mary. I don't know. But the spirit of the Lord will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and you will not know yourself how it has come to pass."

And Mary believed. There are three wonders here: one, that God should become man; another, that a virgin should bear a child; and the third, that Mary believed. And this is the greatest of the three.

Now at the same time the angel disclosed to her that her cousin Elizabeth, in her old age, was with child and in her sixth month. We read in the Gospel of Luke that Mary at once "arose and went over the hills with haste," that she might help her cousin. Notice that she went with haste;

not like our women, who, when they go to market, stop and chat all along the way, but the Virgin Mary went with haste! And she went over the hills. Now let no one in this congregation take this as a warrant for going hiking over the hills unchaperoned. The Virgin Mary was very special, and she had a special command — so she went over the hills with haste!

Mary stayed with Elizabeth and helped her until Elizabeth's baby was born. And then she made soup for Elizabeth, and she gave the baby his bath, and then after a while she went back to Nazareth.

And then what did she do? She told nobody of her secret. She went back and scrubbed the floor, and scoured the pans, and washed the dishes, and milked the cow. And there were many lordly dames in Nazareth who looked down upon her who, had they known the wonder that she carried, would have fallen at her feet.

Now after Mary returned home, God put her to a severe trial. She was engaged to marry Joseph, and when he learned she was with child, he resolved to divorce her. You can imagine how disturbed Joseph must have been when he discovered Mary was with child. She had been gone for three months, visiting Elizabeth. Joseph could hardly see it in a good light — if the same thing happened to you or me, what would we have thought?

If Joseph had publicly accused Mary of adultery, under the letter of the law she would have been stoned. But he didn't want to hurt her, even though he considered her hopeless. He decided to divorce her quietly.

And so this holy virgin, celebrated by all the prophets, was thought by her own husband to be a loose woman. Here she was, deserted by her husband, in danger of death, and with child. But God is faithful. An angel came to Joseph and said: "Fear not. There is no dishonor or disgrace. She is with child by the Holy Spirit."

Now Joseph had nothing to rely on but the word of God, but he accepted it. A godless man would have said it was just a dream, but Joseph believed the word of God and took Mary as his wife.

"Now a decree went out from Augustus Caesar that all the world should be taxed." It was census time, and this census required that every man go to his own village to be enrolled. That meant that Joseph had to go to Bethlehem. That's where he came from. He was a very poor man; he couldn't get work in Bethlehem, so he had gone up to Nazareth to get employment. And now he had to go back to be enrolled.

The pictures always show Mary riding on a donkey, but there's no donkey in the Gospels. She who might have gone in a golden chariot, with angels to attend her, went on foot, and trudged her weight across the snow of the Galilean and the Judean hills. And as they approached Bethlehem, Joseph was saying, "Oh, it will be all right. Soon we'll be among relatives and we can borrow everything." A fine idea that was!

Her time came as they were drawing near, and Joseph sought room for them in the inn. But there was no room in the inn. Of course there was! There was all the room in the inn, but nobody would give up a room! Shame on you, wretched Bethlehem; you should've been burned with brimstone!

And don't let you people in this congregation think you'd have done any better if you were there. I can just hear you say, "Oh, we would have loved to take care of the Baby Jesus. We would have washed his diapers." No you wouldn't! If you'd been there you wouldn't have done a bit better, and if you think you would, why don't you do it for your neighbor in your midst, who is Christ among you?

Joseph did the best he could. But nobody came to give a hand. There the guests were in the inn who could have helped, but they were guzzling and carousing — unmindful of the wonder that was taking place in their midst.

Mary and Joseph were obliged to take refuge in a stable, to share with the cattle, lodging, table, bedchamber and bed, while many a wicked man sat in the hotels and was honored as lord. No one noticed or was conscious of what God was doing in that stable. He lets their inhabitants eat, drink and be merry; but this comfort and treasure are hidden from them. O what a dark night this was for Bethlehem, that was not conscious of that glorious light! See how God shows that he utterly disregards what the world is, has, or desires; and furthermore, that the world shows how little it knows or notices what God is, has and does.

"And she brought forth her firstborn child, and laid him in a manger." Think of it, women! She didn't even have a cradle to lay the baby in. She didn't have anything. No warm water, no cold water, no pan, no towels, no table — nothing that our German women have at such a time. It's a wonder the little fellow didn't freeze to death.

And then when he was before them, what did they do? The pictures always show them kneeling in adoration. We may be sure that they looked with wonder and with joy on this gift which God had given.

"Now there were shepherds abiding in the fields by night, watching over their sheep." That's a mean job. Looking after sheep is a mean job at any time, and especially at night. But it's to the people who are doing their job that God comes.

"And the glory of the Lord shone round about them" — the whole hillside was ablaze with light. "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host." A multitude! All the angels in heaven — and there are more angels in heaven than there are blades of grass on earth — and they were all singing, singing, singing!

I wonder why one of them didn't go and give Mary a hand? You'd think one of them could have taken her a feather bed or a pan of warm water. But there they were, all of them, singing — they were so happy they just had to break out of heaven and sing to somebody. They would have had a bigger celebration if God had let them.

And then when they disappeared, the shepherds said, "Let us go even unto Bethlehem." They believed! I wouldn't have believed. I would have said, "This doesn't make any sense. For all the heavens to open up and the angels sing a cantata to a few shepherds on a hillside! Why, if a king were born surely the angels would have gone to Jerusalem and sung to Caiaphas or King Herod! That they should do it for us out here — it doesn't make any sense. We must have been dreaming."

I wouldn't have believed. If I'd been God and wanted to save the world, I wouldn't have done it that way. I would have just called in the devil and twisted his nose and said, "Let my people go!"

But God is amazing. He sends a little baby, as weak as an earthworm, lying in the feedbox of a donkey, and that little baby crunches the devil's back and overcomes all the power of Hell, and sin, and death.

The shepherds went to Bethlehem, and when they found the baby they knelt in adoration. Then they told the whole countryside round about what had come to pass.

And then we read, "And the shepherds returned." That certainly must be a mistake. It ought to be, "And the shepherds shaved their heads, and tolled their beads, and went into a monastery!" But no, it says they returned. And where to? To their calling; and to their sheep. And a very good thing for their sheep indeed.

"Now at that time there were Wise Men in the East." They were not kings; the scripture doesn't say so. They were Wise Men, learned in all the lore of the East. Today we would call them "professors of natural science."

These Wise Men knew that when the star appeared, a king was born. Now let none of you take that as a warrant for practicing astrology! Because this was a very special star. Any ordinary star is so far up that people who are ten miles apart will think that it is immediately over them. But this star was able to guide to the very place where the young child was laid, so it must have been very low down. And then, it was a moving star. During the day, when they were riding on their camels, the star went along with them, and then when they stopped at night the star stopped and waited until they got up in the morning, and then went along with them again.

And thus they continued until they came to the border of Judea. And then they said to themselves, "Now we'll go straight to the capital city of Jerusalem— that's where this new king will be."

And God said, "You're so sure of yourselves! You don't need the star." And he took it out of heaven. He must have, because when they got to Jerusalem they didn't know where to go. So the star couldn't have been there.

Well, when they came to Jerusalem they couldn't find anyone who knew anything about this king that had been born. But before they gave up and went home, they decided to go and see King Herod.

When they came to Herod, they told him that a star had appeared and that this presaged the birth of a king. "And Herod trembled, and all Jerusalem with him." Well, you can understand why Herod would tremble if there were a new claimant to the throne, but why "all Jerusalem with him"? Because they knew what Herod was like! The Jews knew perfectly well that if there were a new claimant to the throne, Herod would resort to bloodshed. "Herod trembled, and all Jerusalem with him."

Then he called in the Wise Men privately and he said, "What time did the star appear?" They told him; he had the time. Then he called in his own Wise Men, to inquire as to the place. And he

said, “Where is this king to be born?” And they searched the scriptures. Now that’s the thing to do when the star disappears – search the scriptures! They came back and said, “In Bethlehem.”

Herod now had the time and the place, and he sent the Wise Men off to Bethlehem. And we read, “And when they saw the star that appeared in the East they rejoiced greatly.” See! God put it back! When they took the word of the scripture and were willing in all humility to go to Bethlehem, God put it back. It led them to the very spot where the young child lay. And they were not too proud to dismount from their camels and to present their gifts of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh to a poor little babe and his poor young mother.

The world wouldn’t have done so. The world gives its presents to those who already have enough, and to do it the world snatches the bread from the mouths of those who have nothing. But the Wise Men took no offense at the low estate of the babe and his parents. And neither should we be offended at the low estate of our neighbor. Instead we should see Christ in that lowly neighbor, since the Kingdom of Christ is to be found among the lowly and the despised. Those who seek Christ anywhere else will never find him.

The Wise Men couldn’t find him at Herod’s court, or with the high priests, or in the great city of Jerusalem, but only in Bethlehem, in the stable, with Mary and Joseph. In other words, they found him where the world would never have looked.

Let it be that way with you. Forget about the things that glitter in the eyes of the world. Don’t boast that you’ve built churches and endowed masses. In the end, God will say, “Who asked you to do that? I gave you your neighbor, to feed and to help and to love, but you’ve gone about doing foolish things I never told you to do. Be gone; I know you not!”

Instead, present your gifts to Christ as the Wise Men did. When they came to the stable, these wise and wealthy men put aside all the misgivings of pride and common sense, and followed the word of the prophets and the witness of the star. With their eyes they could see only a poor baby in a feed trough, but in faith they accepted him as a king, fell on their knees, and presented their treasures.

Warned by a dream, the Wise Men returned home without reporting to Herod. And Herod, when he learned about it, ordered that all the boy children of Bethlehem be killed.

But an angel appeared at night to Joseph and said, “Fly! Hurry up!” He did not say, “Go”; he said, “Fly!” Joseph awoke and he did not think to himself: “There is no need to get started tonight. I’ll wait a couple of weeks, especially with a wife and child,” but he said: “I cannot wait until daylight. Wake up, Mary, wake up! I’m afraid your secret is out. Let’s be gone, that those who seek us may not find.” Joseph must have hurried in great concern, but he said to himself, “He who told me to go will lead me.” He did not take time to put away anything in the house, but left everything.

But God had already provided that the Wise Men should have made presents which well supplied the costs of the journey. Matthew says that they gave gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It would have been a very considerable contribution, out of which Joseph and Mary could support themselves for some time, and perhaps the poor besides. The devil, Herod, and the priests meant to destroy Christ, but God provided the escape.