

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We hear the prophet Isaiah
proclaim this night:

⁶ For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
(Isaiah 9:6)

I begin this night with a very heart felt welcome to all gathered here to celebrate and to hear once again that a child has been born for us, a Son given to us who is grace and peace...who is from God our Father, and who is God among us. This child born this night is the light of hope for our darkened world, he is the sure and certain hope of new life...he is Jesus Christ.

And so it is that we celebrate this new life amidst the clutter and confusion of our culture, amidst the darkness of violence and the cruelty of our culture and our world. This child born this night is grace upon grace, he is mercy, and he is salvation for all and not just those we choose, but those whom God chooses as the angel praises tell us in our Gospel tonight:

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

...peace among those whom God favors.

We all seem to know whom God favors...don't we? This verse was singled out and brought up at our Bible study this week...it raised a few brows..."those whom God favors?" This line rippled through the Bible study and then came the question...Well who are they Pastor...who are the favored? Who are the favored? I said, of course they are those whom God favors and NOT those who I think God favors.

We tend to think that this verse in the Gospel lesson this evening leaves the door open for *US* to decide whom God favors. And to show that we know whom God favors we point fingers at the world and the culture and say God certainly doesn't favor that. And with the "finger-pointing" we decide what is unfavorable and then assume its unfavorable to God also. So, with our choosing...we assume the manner in which our culture unfavorably celebrates Christmas is also unfavorable to God.

Yes I know...with all the finger pointing and complaining about the cultural abuse of the Christmas season, there are those who are going to say or at least wonder...why on earth do you have Santa Clause here tonight...God would NOT favor that? And from that perspective, I think Santa takes the brunt of all the church's complaining, he the reason Christmas is so commercialized and laced with too many lights...yes I saw the other morning in the paper someone complaining about the light displays distract our attention from the manger. And so we look at Santa in our assumed righteous anger and say...He is *NOT* the *reason for the season*...Jesus Christ is the reason for the season!

So...Pastor why is Santa here...God would NOT favor that?! To that I say, "Yeah, why is he here, I know Santa's really busy, especially tonight, but he took time out of his schedule to stop

by...and to be with our kids!” And I know that I am NOT a betting man but I would bet a good amount of money that very few mainline churches, if any, have Santa Clause escorting their children to the Crèche.

Yes we all know the reason for the season...don't we! Moreover, we know whom God favors...so you

You better watch out,
You better not cry,
Better not pout, I'm telling you why:
God would NOT favor that.

He's making a list And checking it twice, God certainly knows
Who's naughty and nice.

He sees you when you're sleepin',
He knows when you're awake,
he knows if you've been bad or good,
So be good for God's sake.

You better watch out, You better not cry, Better not pout, I'm telling you why:
God does not favor that sort of behavior.

This is exactly how we know whom God favors because in our understanding we simply exchange Santa Clause for God, NOT just in the lyrics of the song, but rather in our theology, in our understanding of God's grace and salvation, and especially this is how we feel God in our hearts. But we become the one's who better watch out because through our understanding we appoint ourselves as the ones' who decide whom God favors...according to what I call our Santa Theology. Santa is very gracious to the toys left on the Island of Misfit Toys and rescues them all...but God gives His life for them and rescues us all.

And while Isaiah so gloriously prophesized about this baby that will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace, Isaiah also prophesized this:

² Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. ³ The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. (Isaiah 1:2-3)

In my heart of hearts, I like to believe we all understand, however, in our self-righteousness we forget or we view and understand God from *OUR* perspective...what we find favorable and this perspective obscures what God reveals to us in the story of this birth and in the very life of Jesus Christ. This is why I just love the birth narrative that is before us tonight from St. Luke because it breaks down our self-righteousness and allows us to open our hearts and minds to the depth of God's love for us revealed in the story of the birth of this baby.

Today in our culture and our world there are so many very glamorous and very powerful figures that capture our attention, our adoration, our thoughts, and understandings, and most of all they capture our hearts. Through all the publicity and through so many different media outlets we are bombarded with and saturated in the hype of these figures and our minds are made up through the opinions and attitudes found in the various social media platforms and outlets. But tonight, Luke introduces us to a true and powerful king, a ruler greater and yet humbler than the most powerful media giant, political figure, or athlete or artist within our current culture. Luke introduces us to a vulnerable baby, who is homeless, born to an unwed mother...an unwed mother who is about 14 years old. If this dear baby were born in our culture today he would have so many things going against him...and more than likely he would NOT have a chance at any success in his life. But this baby is light and life, this vulnerable baby is forgiveness and mercy, this baby is our mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace and the one who will die for us all so that we may live.

Granted that at the time of this birth there was no mass communications other than word of mouth. But the angel of the Lord who was bringing good news of great joy for all the people did not go into the towns or the seat of government, or to the rulers or powerful people of the towns and villages. No, the angel went outside the regions of the town to the shepherds who were living in the fields keeping watch over their flocks. For us today, shepherds are viewed as noble and they evoke a positive pastoral image. However, in the time of the birth of Jesus, shepherds were scorned as shiftless and viewed as dishonest...they were the dregs of society. Shepherding was a despised occupation and regarded as low-down work and the men who did it, we considered as low-down as the work itself. This is how we viewed this occupation, but God does not. From the prophet Ezekiel we hear this:

¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak,.... I will feed them with justice.
(Ezekiel 34:15-16)

We all know, but forget quickly as we pray, the Lord is my shepherd.

From the very opening line of our Gospel lesson this night we hear that:

...a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²
This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. (Luke 2:1-3)

Ironically, with the mention of Cesar Augustus there is a drastic power shift in the story tonight. Tonight, the Gospel begins with the reference to the powerful emperor Cesar Augustus and people obeying the commands of that emperor. But God sends messengers NOT to the emperor but to the lowly shepherds in the fields. The emperor does not show up at the birth of Jesus, the story ends this night with the shepherds...the lowly shepherds at the birth of God before us in Jesus Christ.

In this Gospel lesson before us tonight, we see our mighty and powerful God revealing Himself in the rudeness and the lowliness, the struggles, and the pain of the darkness of this world.

Notice, God doesn't change the struggles, the pain and darkness of the world or make it to suit, God is in it and part of it, and obedient to it.

God is given to us in this vulnerable baby, wrapped in clothes, and laid in a feeding trough. How fitting is this...that the baby laid in a feeding trough continues to feed us...this baby will feed our very souls this night in this Holy Meal that is set before us. Unfortunately, we get caught up in our views and our opinions about whom God favors or how the world has over-commercialized Christmas, we assume God's favor will not be found in any of this and we have the audacity to think we can destroy the Spirit of God coming to us. But this is exactly what is being said tonight, we draw conclusions from our own opinions but God always shows us our opinions are not His will. God is more powerful than all earthly rulers, or more powerful than any holiday sale and brighter than any amount of lighting decorations we put up...and God has dealt with all who are on the naughty list, not by withholding toys, but He gives His very life.

The Gospel lesson tonight may evoke the question within us or inspire us to ask, how do we go to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place. I would say read closely what Luke has written for us, look then beyond what we think, and notice that the story tonight about the birth of Jesus Christ says NOTHING at all about our merits and our works, but only the gift we are given in this baby before us. May this cause us to look beyond what we might think of whom God favors or our cultural situation and may we see the real depth and power being revealed here in this scene. Listen NOT to a history, but listen to the gift we are given in this birth. Look beyond the obvious, look beyond what we might think, this is not just a story or a scene of a special situation this is the gift of grace from God appearing and bringing light to our darkness, bringing salvation to all this night.

To you all gathered this night, I wish you and yours a very blessed Christmastide and may we NOT just ponder the gift of grace in our hearts, but may we share this gift of grace and mercy in truth and in action...not just in this season of Christmas, but throughout the entire year.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.