

Devotions - December 23 - 29, 2007
by, Bishop Thomas Skrenes
Northern Great Lakes Synod

Sunday, December 23

A REAL BABY

"Now the birth of Jesus the messiah took place in this way..." Matthew 1:18

I was present for the birth of my two youngest sons, David and Aaron. I remember it with great thanksgiving. I was never nervous about being a part of this birth until about five minutes before the boys were born – then I started to worry. What if? What if? I also recall spending time immediately after their birth, counting the fingers and the toes on each hand and foot – making sure they were "okay and normal." They were normal – thanks be to God!

For thousands and hundreds of thousands of years, the birth of babies have taken place in much the same way. It is a real physical process complete with a great deal of pain for the mothers and tears for the baby – and sometimes just plain bewilderment for the fathers.

The birth of Jesus took place in that same way. It was a real birth. We have in this child, a real person and he will become a man. A man like no other, however. In these days, as Christmas grows very close remember, we worship a Lord who has been born of woman and who has walked with us. Our faith invites us to walk with him.

LET US PRAY

Infant Lord, be born in us. Remind us each day of your love for all humanity and keep us close to each other and to you. Bless pastors and other ministers of your holy Church as they proclaim the babe's birth. Bless the work of this synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Watch over its pastors and lay leaders. In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Monday, December 24

A REAL DAY

"In those days, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus..."

Luke 2:1a

I fancy myself a bit of a historian. The truth is I enjoy history and try to read as much of it as my time allows. Now, I am reading a 550 page history of the C.I.A. It is great history!

Historians tell stories about things that really happened. The Gospel writer Luke tells us about the life of Jesus in his Gospel and goes on in the second volume of his works, the Book of Acts, to tell the story of the history of the early Church. Historians are taught to work with the facts and to find the story rooted in reality and then to tell it in a way that describes the truth.

Thus, tonight in our churches, as we hear the Christmas story, we will hear first about a very real historical figure (Emperor Augustus) and a very real event (the Roman census.) In the midst of that reality we will hear of the Savior of the world. We will hear of a God who loves us that he sent his only Son!

Tonight, our very real story of our own life will intersect with the Christ story. Our life story in Ishpeming or Ironwood or Ste. St. Marie or Rhineland or Atlantic Mine or wherever you live will connect with God. In our life's history, God will make of that – the wonderful story of salvation. That is a real good history!

LET US PRAY

You are the source of history, Of God. You are the baby born this night. Come into our lives anew and create within us new stories of faith and life, building our history into yours. Give courage to all bishops, pastors and lay leaders of the Church. In the Name of the historical Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday, December 25

A REAL HOMECOMING

"All went to their own towns to be registered."

Luke 2:3

Are you home today for Christmas? Are you in front of your own computer at home today? Some of us have moved a lot in our lives and some of us have pretty much lived close to where we were born. Where is home for you? There is nothing like being "at home" for Christmas. Many travel many miles at great expense to "go home" during this season. College dormitories empty out, hotels and motels are largely empty today, and the roads are only busy with people "going home."

Today on this Christmas I am thinking of those many people who are not home for Christmas. Here are a few of them:

- +People who must work today to protect all of us – police, fire fighters, hospital staffs.
- +The hundreds of thousands of American soldiers, sailors and diplomats around the world in Baghdad, Kabul, Germany, Asia and on land and sea.
- +Millions of people displaced and refugeeed by war and natural disasters.
- +The Millions of Americans in prisons.
- +Those hospitalized or in nursing homes who would rather today be "home."
- +The thousands of Christian missionaries around the world spreading the good news of Jesus.

On this Christmas I rejoice that God finds us even when we are not at home. This Christmas I give thanks that Jesus has made a "home" for me in heaven and on earth with God's people. Today – this Christmas Day – I am full of joy that Christ has found me and allowed me to be with him. My mother used to say, "Home is where your family lives." May our "home" be with God every day!

LET US PRAY

Bless those not at home this day, bless those who are homeless, bless those who are away from their homes. Help our church, our synod, our world wide Lutheran communion to be a home place too. May we all find our ultimate home in you dear Lord Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, December 26

A REAL EXPECTATION

"He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged..."

Luke 2:5a

Is it over? Probably before the end of today, someone in your neighborhood will throw the Christmas tree out on the curb! Kohl's and Younkers and Target and Wal-Mart will begin their "After Christmas Sales" today. So is it over? The world thinks Christmas is one day deal – but like Mary and Joseph at the birth of the baby Jesus, the birth is only the beginning of the adventure.

On the night of Christ's birth, the Holy family had great expectations. Mary and Joseph knew this child would be very different. They, of course, did not yet fully realize that the baby Jesus would live a life of joy, wonder and heartbreak. Mary could not have foreseen the cross.

But today, the day after Christmas, we too have no idea what the next year will bring. Economic success or collapse? War or peace? Good health or chronic trouble? Friendly and loving family relationships or a lot of personal familial pain? Yet we have "Great expectations." A sign of God's presence in our lives is that we lean into the future confident not of our own ability or efforts but instead fully aware of the love of Christ and the assurance of God's peace. Always. I have great expectations!

LET US PRAY

Lord, today I feel a little tired. Stir me up. Give me a positive Spirit and help me to expect the best in others and myself. But help me to trust in you. Give hope to your church around the globe. Remind me of your never failing love through the expected Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Thursday, December 27

A REAL SCARE

"Then the angel of the Lord stood before them...and they were terrified!
But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid."
Luke 2:9-10

Christmas season is a big money making time for the movie producers. And one type of movie that seems to bring lots of young people into the theaters are the ones that scare us. You know the type of movie I am talking about. Plenty of "blood and guts." The modern horror movie is like Alfred Hitchcock on steroids! Actually I do not like to go to those movies, because I refuse to pay good money to watch a movie version of a chain saw murder or of a ghost eating people. I am not into scary movies. In fact I am not a fan of fear!

I figure life is scary enough when you think of starving children in Darfur or improvised explosive devices in Kabul or Falujah. Life is frightening enough when death stalks half of the world with malaria or with HIV-AIDS. It is frightening enough to see the people in my own family who have died from cancer or the many people in our churches who have mental depression or who live in near impossible family situations.

There is a lot of terror out there in real life. So the angel who wanders up to a bunch of grizzly, scared to their wits shepherds, is my good friend. The angel says some magic words to these startled guys; "Do not be afraid." Think of it! Do not be afraid! As I go and visit an older friend in the nursing home or a buddy of mine struggling with a difficult marriage, or as I contemplate my own mortality – I live in that angels' presence. Do not be afraid! And I say, "I am not afraid because Christ brings me joy." And all those bad things, as real as they are, will not overcome the love of God for the world and for me. Period.

LET US PRAY

Lord, I have my moments. I am afraid some days. In the midst of that fear send your angel and give me the message. Bless your Church, its pastors and leaders. Teach us all not to be afraid of the future but to live in the name of Jesus forever. Amen.

Friday, December 28

A REAL SIGN

"This will be a sign for you. You will find the child..."

Luke 2:12

What is your sign? A long time ago now I read Paul Tillich, a theologian of the mid 20th century who defined a sign as "something that points to a reality." When someone says to you, "What are the signs of the times we live in?" what is your response? How would you describe this present time. This day in the church year is called "The Massacre of the Holy Innocents." It is a terrible day in the midst of the "Twelve Days of Christmas." We recall the soldiers of King Herod who killed many children to insure the death of one child – Jesus! But God had other plans for Jesus and he became a refugee and fled to Africa where he lived until it was safe to return home. On that first Christmas Eve, the angel said that the child would be known to the shepherds, "The sign that points to the reality" would be the cloths he was wrapped in and the manger he was at rest in.

If you were known by something, what would it be? What is your sign? Is it a dollar sign? Is it a hot new car or a hunting camp or even the "G" of the Green Bay Packers or the "Lion" of the Detroit Lions? Jesus gave us a sign – that sign was a cross and on that simple sign he carried the grief's and sins of the world. In this world there is a lot of competition for our time and energy. False Gods come and go and linger on in our lives and imaginations. However, the sign of the cross remains.

LET US PRAY

Allow us to live, Lord Jesus, and to die under the only sign in heaven and on earth that lasts forever--your cross. Bless your whole Church, watch over the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and all who lift high the cross of Christ. Help us to expect much of our bishops and pastors and lay leaders and ourselves. Teach us live in the shadow of the cross and cling to it above all else. Amen.

Saturday, December 29

A REAL GOD

"Glory to God in the highest heaven..."

Luke 2:14

As we come crashing towards the end of the year, we start looking around and making a summary of the year that is passing. We ask how is it with our health? Our bank account? We start thinking about goals and ambitions and our futures and we wonder about what the next year will bring to us and to our family. Perhaps one question we should ask is: "How is it with our soul?"

When I was a parish pastor and people would, in one way or another, ask about spiritual matters in their lives, I would remind folks to make room in their lives for God. How do we make room for God? We spend more time in prayer, we worship God more, we read the Bible more, we give more of our time away to God's work and we give more money to God's Church and God's mission on this earth. When we make more room for God – God will fill our lives with his presence and give us a sense of joy.

If God is real and if God cares about us, God will prevail in our lives. Believing in God is more than just a doctrinal matter. It is a matter of placing your whole life into the hands of the one who created you. At this year's end – when others are promising to lose weight in the new year or to exercise more (those are good ideas, especially for me) promise yourself that you will make more room in your life for God. After all God is Real!

LET US PRAY

Real God, send your spirit into our unreality. Give us and your Church a sense of your real presence so that we can serve you and your whole catholic church. Thank you for sending real love to us. Thank you for being our God. Amen.