

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

Tonight, we're doing something different than in past years. Because, let's face it, we have no choice. This is a year unlike any other in living memory. Nine months ago, our collective lives were disrupted by this global pandemic that still has us in its grips. It has been a different year for everyone. For many it has been particularly difficult, with the loss of loved ones for some, the loss of employment for others, and for others still the loss of a place to live. As we go about our Christmas celebrations this year, we must not forget those who have been most harmed by this pandemic. Most of us in this congregation, though, have not been so drastically affected. We have been inconvenienced, to be sure, anxious, maybe, perhaps even depressed – and I don't want to minimize the devastating effect that depression can have on people's lives. But for those of us for whom the difficulties of this year have not become overwhelming, this year has also been an opportunity. Being forced out of our daily, weekly, and monthly routines can be a gift, a chance to rethink our lives, to reevaluate our priorities. If nothing else, we have been given a chance to see that the way things have always been are not the way things *have* to be. And just that simple awareness can be life-changing. Some of us can't wait to get back to life as it was before. But others of us have learned from this new reality, and will carry some of our new routines into the future. Ever since the beginning of the pandemic back in March, my parents and my sisters and their families have held a family "happy hour" by Zoom on Sunday evenings. I have never been so well-connected to my family since I left home for college. We've had the capability of being connected this way for many years, but we never used it. Life got in the way, as they say. We were too busy with other things. Then suddenly many of those other things went away. Now I can't imagine not doing this. I kick myself for not making this a priority before now, and I fervently hope we will continue our new tradition in the post-pandemic world.

Tonight, as I said, we're doing things a little differently with our Christmas Eve service here at Grace. Instead of our usual festival service of Holy Communion we're having a modified service of lessons and carols. The English invented this service a hundred years ago, and the quintessential service of lessons and carols happens at Kings College, Cambridge. Maybe some of you caught their annual broadcast this morning. It was different this year for them, too, since a congregation could not gather at the King's College Chapel. As with us, only a few people could be there in person, and they made extensive use of recordings. Unlike their service, ours will not be two hours long, you'll be glad to know, and we will have only six readings, instead of the traditional nine. But that is twice the number of readings we usually have in our Christmas Eve service, and tonight I want them to be the focus of your attention. I want to let these six readings tell the Christmas story, along with the traditional Christmas carols that surround them.

But before we do that, I want to help you to hear them, and maybe to connect this ancient story to your life here at the end of this remarkable year some two thousand years after Jesus' birth. As we heard last night at our Evening Prayer service, in an excerpt from one of Martin Luther's Christmas sermons, Luther emphasized the angels' words to the shepherds, "to *you* is born... a savior." Those words to the angels, Luther insisted, are for us too. The savior born for the shepherds is also born for us. If we regard this simply as a quaint, heartwarming story from long ago that has nothing to do with us, I might as well tell you again the story of how Helen and I went off the road in an ice storm just outside of Bloomington, Illinois with our four-month-old first-born child and were rescued by a passing truck driver and taken back to Bloomington,

where we got the last room in the hotel, and Andrew slept in a drawer. That's a heartwarming story too, with a happy ending, but it has nothing to do with you, and no real meaning for your life.

Luther insisted rightly that the story of Jesus' birth is a fundamentally different kind of story. The prophets, the angels, and the shepherds in our readings tonight are messengers also for us, that into the darkness of our present existence has come the glory of God, the light of the world, God's very self, to rescue us from the power of sin, death, and evil and to open to us the life that God has intended for us all along, the life that God created us for.

At the center of the story we're about to hear in lessons and carols is a young woman who was pulled, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, out of the ordinary routines of her life some nine months earlier, and into something extraordinary. At the end of our fifth reading tonight, Luke tells us that Mary treasured all the things that had happened to her and "pondered them in her heart." That is our task tonight too, brothers and sisters in Christ, to hear again the story of Christ's birth, to treasure it and ponder it in our hearts, so that the glad tidings of great joy open our lives to God's good future for us and all people, even and especially in the darkness of our present reality. Let us treasure this news, ponder it, and be assured that God is indeed with us in Jesus Christ tonight, tomorrow, and in all the days and years to come. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.