



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

# Pastor's Update

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

Life is perhaps better measured by the breaths we do not take than by the breaths we do take. Life seems to take its meaning from those moments when quite literally our breath is taken away, those times which are so amazing and so startling that we gasp with surprise. What is it in this life that takes your breath away?

There seems to be so few of those moments left, for we live in a time which has unashamedly trivialized the sacred. What used to excite children and adults alike a generation ago seems in this digitalized age to be "boring."

The sunrise by a pristine lake, the first cry of a newborn baby, the view from the top of a mountain, the completely unexpected gift from someone we love, the incredible sounds from a Christmas concert. No matter how many years we have lived, it is imperative that we never lose the capacity for amazement, the ability to wonder, the disposition to be truly surprised. For only then can we truly experience Christmas.

Christmas is one of those breathless moments that cannot be captured by word or camera or easel or the finite mind. It is night of infinite meaning, spanning generations and centuries with a meaning that far transcends any of our fleeting images.

Christmas Eve is one of those times that should take our breath away, when shepherds on hillsides hear symphonies by angels, when wise men watching stars are moved to travel long distances to look for a king, and when the Son of God spends his first few moments on this earth in the wooden feedbox of animals.

Christmas Eve is full of things that simply cannot be, but are. This is especially evident to Mary, and it is not at all surprising that Mary finds her breath literally taken away. When the angel came some

months earlier and announced the coming of the Christ, her words are recorded. When Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, she listened to her sing and they sang together Mary's song, the Magnificat.

But at the birth of Jesus, no word of Mary's is recorded, only that she pondered all of these events in her heart. This is hardly surprising, for what words can anyone wrap around such an awe-inspiring event. At our daughter's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration last weekend, everyone had much to say. But in the midst of the gaiety, Jackie and I could remember the absolute and stunning miracle of giving birth to a beautiful little girl; it still, all these years later, takes our breath away.

This Christmas, some 2000 years later, can we even grasp a small portion of the significance of it all, the earth-shattering meaning of the incarnation, God becoming a baby? The whole idea was absurd in the ancient world gods were to be superhuman, other worldly, untainted by this grimy, smelly world. For those who had been influenced by Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, it was clear that the gods wanted nothing at all to do with this place called Earth.

But in this act designed to take our breath away, God became a human being and walked among us, or as Paul writes, "he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant." All this began in the manger in Bethlehem. It is simply beyond our comprehension why God would choose to come this way, the lowliest of the lowly.

When we want to get someone's attention, we usually make a lot of noise, jump up and down and wave our arms, or maneuver ourselves in front of the camera. But when God wanted to get our attention, when he wanted to announce a new kingdom, he did not appear at halftime at the domed stadium, or write a best seller, but came as

a baby in a stable. And as Mary pondered all this she was overcome with the surprise of it all, God as a baby, a King in a manger, the Messiah with diapers, heaven coming to earth.

One of the parts of this story that still takes our breath away is the decision of God to inhabit the lowly. I would have expected that God would come to the kings, the religious leaders, the saints, the movers and shakers. But instead, all evidence points to the fact that he came almost exclusively to the lowest.

The first appearances of the angels were to the shepherds, who were the lowest of the low. They were not allowed in the temple, because they were deemed unclean by the religious purists of the day, yet God announced the birth of his son first to them.

And Jesus never changed that love of the lowest. Lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, fishermen, blind beggars, all of them captured his attention and love. And finally, in the most emphatic act of all, he took his place between two condemned criminals on a cross. Glory to God in the lowest.

Do you ever wonder why Jesus seems to be so absent from many of our leaders of the day, the famous, the powerful, and the rich? Not all by any means, but many. Because Jesus has always been found most often among the lowest, the powerless, the humble, and the outcasts. This is why in announcing his birth, Mary's song, the Magnificat, talks about the day which is coming when the rich and powerful will be brought low and the poor and humble will be raised up.

Where do you think Jesus is spending this Christmas? I think again it is with the lowest, those lives which have hit bottom, those who are hungry or sick or in prison. Jesus is found with children, with those with AIDS and cancer, those in hospitals and nursing homes and with all those who are caring for them.

Jesus' love for the little ones is so pervasive, it led him to say, "Except one becomes like a little child, he or she cannot enter the kingdom of God." Glory

to God in the lowest.

The legendary Christmas hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" says it this way; "O holy child of Bethlehem, Descend to us we pray, Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today." Where is Jesus born today? In the lives of those who admit that we are among the lowest, those who need a Savior. Glory to God in the lowest.

I read recently about a family that seems to understand all of this. Each Christmas they hang two baskets in their home. One of these baskets contains a manger scene, with Mary, Joseph, the baby in the manger, shepherds, animals, wise men. The other basket is full of straw.

Every time one member of the family does something thoughtful, something loving for another member of the family, or those outside the family, they would take one piece of straw and place it in the manger of the baby Jesus. The message was clear. Each time we do something in love for someone else, we make the bed of Jesus softer, we make him welcome.

Whenever we become one of the lowest, when we become a servant, it is there that Jesus is born in us. Glory to God in the lowest.

Isn't it amazing that God came to this troubled and violent world at all, and isn't it almost unbelievable that he came for people just like us? Not just for saints, not just for the famous or those in the highest places, but for you and me. Kind of leaves you breathless, doesn't it?