

The Fruits and Signs of the Power of the Word of God

Second Christmas Day (Or Early Christmas Service)

Sermon on Luke 2:15-20

Author: Dr. Martin Luther (1483-1546) Year: 1522

Text

¹⁵ And it came to pass, when the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing that is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. ¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found both Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in the manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known concerning the saying, which was spoken to them about this child. ¹⁸ And all that heard it wondered at the things which were spoken unto them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these sayings, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, even as it was spoken unto them. (Luke 2:15-20)

Sermon

¹ In the light of the exposition of the preceding Gospel this text is easily understood for it cites an example and the putting into practice of the doctrine taught there, in that the shepherds did, and found, all just as the angels had told them. Consequently it teaches what the results and fruit of the Word of God are, and what the marks are, by which we know whether the Word of God is established in our hearts and whether it is doing its work there.

The Fruits and Signs of the Power of the Word Of God

² The *first* and principal fruit of the power of the Word is faith. For had not these shepherds believed the angel they would never have gone to Bethlehem, they would moreover never have done one of the things related of them in this Gospel.

³ One, however, might say: Yes, I would also gladly believe if an angel thus from heaven were to preach to me. This is very foreign to the subject. Whoever does not receive the Word for its own sake, will never receive it for the sake of the preacher, even if all the angels preached it to him. And he who receives it because of the preacher does not believe in the Word, neither in God through the Word, but he believes the preacher and in the preacher, Hence the faith of such persons does not last long. But whoever believes the Word, does not care who the person is that speaks the Word, and neither will he honor the Word for the sake of the person; but on the contrary, he honors the person because of the Word, and always subordinates the person to the Word. And if the preacher perishes,

or even falls from his faith and preaches differently, he will forsake the person of the preacher rather than the Word of God. He abides by what he has heard, although the person of the preacher may be what he will, and come and go as he may.

⁴ The true difference between godly faith and human faith consists also in this, that human faith cleaves to the person of the preacher, believes, trusts and honors the Word for the sake of him who spake it. But godly faith, on the other hand, cleaves to the Word, which is God himself; he believes, trusts and honors the Word, not because of him who preaches it; but because he feels it so surely the truth that no one can ever turn him again from it, even if the same preacher were to try to do it. This was proved by the Samaritans, John 4:42, when they had heard first of Christ from the heathen woman and upon her word they went out of the city to Christ. After they themselves heard Christ, they said to the woman, “*Now we believe, not because of thy speaking: for we have heard for ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.*”

⁵ Moreover, all who believed Christ because of his person and his miracles, fell from their faith when he was crucified. So it is in our day and so has it always been. The Word itself, without any regard to persons, must be enough for the heart, it must include and lay hold of man, so that he, as if taken captive, feels how true and right it is, even if the world, all the angels, all the princes of hell said differently, yea, if God himself spake otherwise; as he at times tempts his own elect and appears as if he were different than he had before declared. So it was with Abraham when commanded to offer his son Isaac; with Jacob, while wrestling with the angel; and with David, when persecuted by his son Absalom; and other like examples.

⁶ This faith triumphs in life and death, in hell and heaven, and nothing is able to overthrow it; because it rests upon nothing but the Word without any regard whatever to persons.

⁷ These shepherds possessed such faith; for they agree with and cleave to the Word so fully that they forget the angels who declared it to them. They do not say, Let us go and see the word that the angels made known to us, but the word that the Lord hath made known unto us. The angels were soon forgotten and the Word of God only seized and retained. In like manner St. Luke speaks in the text of Mary, that she kept all these sayings, pondering them in her heart. Without doubt she did not let the humble appearance of the shepherds trouble her, but esteemed all as the Word of God. Not only Mary, but all the others who heard these words from the shepherds, and wondered, as the text says. All clung to the Word.

⁸ And although it is the idiom of the Hebrew language that when it speaks of an historic fact, it says, “*they wish to see the word*”, as St. Luke says here (because the history is embodied in words and is made known by means of words); so is it therefore thus provided by God that faith should be expressed as that which cleaves to the words and relies upon the words spoken concerning the history. For if Christ’s life and sufferings were not embodied in the words by which faith is anchored, they would have been of no use, because all who saw them with their eyes received no benefit from them, or very little.

⁹ The *second* fruit is the unity in the spirit. For it is the nature of Christian faith to unite hearts into one, that they be of one mind and of one will, as Psalm 68:6 says: “*God, the Lord, Christ our God, setteth the solitary in families.*” St. Paul speaks of the unity of the Spirit in many places as in Romans 12:18; 1 Corinthians 12:4; and Ephesians 4:3, where he says: “*Be ever diligent that ye be of one mind, of one will.*” Such unity is not possible apart from faith, for every one is well pleased with his own ways, therefore is the land, as the proverb runs, full of fools. Here one sees in his own

experiences how the various orders, callings, and sects are divided among themselves. Every one esteems his order, his calling, his character, his work, his plans the best, and the right road to heaven. He disparages the things of others and rejects them; as we see at present among the priests, monks, bishops and all who profess to be spiritual.

¹⁰ However those, who have the true faith, know that it depends only upon faith, in which they unanimously agree. Therefore they are never divided and disunited because of any outward calling, conduct or work. To them all external matters, however different they may be, are the same. Thus the shepherds here are of one mind, of one will, speak the same thought among themselves, use the same form of words and say: *“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem”*, etc.

¹¹ The *third* fruit is humility, in that they acknowledge themselves to be human. Therefore the Evangelist adds *“The shepherds”*, etc. For faith immediately teaches that everything human is nothing before God. Hence they despise self and think nothing of themselves. This is true, fundamental humility and self knowledge. Humility then brings with it that it does not inquire about things great and high in the world. They consider themselves a humble poor and despised people, as St. Paul teaches in Romans 12:16, when he says: *“Set not your mind on high things, but condescend to them that are lowly”*. As Psalm 15:4 also teaches: *“In the eyes of the righteous the reprobate is despised, but he honoreth them that fear Jehovah.”*

¹² Out of all this follows peace. For he who esteems nothing of all the external and great things, easily lets them pass and never quarrels with any one about them. He experiences something better inwardly in the faith of his heart. Unity, peace, and humility are also found among murderers, public sinners, even among hypocrites. It is however a unity of the flesh and not of the spirit; as Pilate and Herod became reconciled to one another and exercised a peaceful and humble spirit toward each other. Likewise the Jews, according to Psalm 2:2: *“The Kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together.”* In like manner are, the pope, monks and priests one when they contend against God, who at other times are nothing but mere sects among themselves. Hence this is called an unity, humility and peace of the spirit, in that it is above and in spiritual things, that is, in Christ.

¹³ The *fourth* is love to your neighbor and a renouncing of self. The example of the shepherds proves this in that they leave their sheep and go forth, not to the great and high lords in Jerusalem, not to the aldermen in Bethlehem, but to the little company in the stable. They present themselves to the lowly and do whatever is required of them. Had they not had faith they would not have thus left their sheep; and they would not have abandoned their work, had not the angels before command them to do so. They did it of their own free will and of their own counsel, as the text teaches. They conferred with one another about it and came with haste, and the angels did not command them, but only pointed out what they would find, and left it to their own free will, whether they would go and seek.

¹⁴ Love acts in like manner. It knows no command, it does everything by virtue of its own impulse, it hastens and delays not, it is enough that its attention is only called to a thing, it needs no taskmaster, neither will it tolerate one. Oh, much might be said on this thought! So should the Christian live more freely in love, forget self and the things of self, only think and hasten to his neighbor, as St. Paul in Philippians 2:4 says: *“Not looking each of you to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others.”* And Galatians 6:2: *“Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”*

¹⁵ However, the pope and his bishops and priests have filled the world with laws and constraint, and there is nothing now in the whole world but mere driving and alarming. No voluntary order or calling

exists any longer, since it has been proclaimed that love should be extinguished and the world be mined by human doctrines.

¹⁶ The *fifth* is joy. This appears in the words that we gladly speak and hear about the things faith in the heart has received. So here the shepherds converse with one another joyously and kindly about that which they had heard and believed. They use very many words, as if they were talking to no purpose. They are not satisfied by saying: Let us go unto Bethlehem and see the saying that has come to pass; they add, which the Lord did and hath made known unto us. Is it not unnecessary talk that they say: What has come to pass there, that God has done? Could they not have easily spoken in fewer words thus: Let us see the saying, God has done there.

¹⁷ But the spirit's joy bubbles over with cheery words, and still none are useless, yea, all is too little, and the soul can not pour forth itself as it gladly would desire, like Psalm 45:1 says: "*My heart overfloweth with a goodly matter,*" as if he were to say, I would gladly tell it forth, but I cannot; it is greater than I can express, so that my speaking is hardly a hiccough. Hence the saying in Psalm 51:17 and other places: "*My tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness,*" that is, proclaim, sing and speak it forth with rejoicing and jumping. And Psalm 119:171: "*Let my lips utter praise*", like a boiling pot wells and bubbles forth.

¹⁸ The *sixth* fruit: they follow with acts. For it is as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:20: "*For the Kingdom of God is not in word, but in power.*" Thus here the shepherds do not only say, Let us go and see, but they also went, yea, they do more than they say. For the text says, "*They came in haste,*" that is more than merely going, as they agreed to do, so faith and love always do more than they promise, and their affairs are alive, intertwined, active, bubbling over. So a Christian should be a man of few words and of many deeds, as he will surely be, if he is a true Christian. If he is not such a man then he is not yet a real Christian.

¹⁹ The *seventh* fruit is, they freely confess and publicly preach the Word that was spoken to them concerning this child, which is the highest work in the Christian life. In this we are to risk our body and life, our wealth and honor. For to believe right and live a good life quietly and with yourself is not attacking the wicked spirit very hard; but when we go forth and publish the same abroad, confess, preach and praise for the sake of the welfare of others: that he will not permit. Therefore Luke adds here that the shepherds did not only come and see, but they also preached about this child what they heard in the field, not only before Mary and Joseph, but before everybody.

²⁰ Do you not think there were many who thought they were fools and insane people, in that they attempted, as coarse and unschooled laymen, to speak of the angels' song and sermon? But the shepherds, full of faith and joy cheerfully became fools in the eyes of men for God's sake. A Christian also does the same. For God's Word must be considered as foolishness and falsehood in this world.

²¹ The *eighth* fruit is Christian liberty. This is bound by no work, but all works are alike to a Christian as they come to his notice. For these shepherds run to no desert, put on no hood, never shave their heads, never change clothing, time, food, drink nor any external work, they return again to their sheep cots and there serve their God. For a Christian character consists not in outward conduct, neither does it change any one as to his outward calling or position, but as to his inner state, that is, he possesses another heart, another mind, will and impulse that does even the work, which any person without such a mind and will does. For a Christian knows that all depends entirely upon faith; therefore he goes, stands, eats, drinks, clothes himself, works and lives as an ordinary man in

his calling, so that one can not see his Christianity; as Christ says in Luke 17:20-21: "*The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation; neither shall they say, Lo, here ! or, there ! for lo the kingdom of God is within you.*"

²² Against this liberty the pope and his spiritual offices contend with their laws and chosen dress, food, prayers, sacred places and persons; they take themselves and every person captive by their soul snares with which they filled the world, as St. Anthony saw in a dream.

For they thought it depended upon our nature and works that we are saved. They call other people worldly, although they themselves are seven fold more worldly, since all their affairs are the doings of man, concerning which God has commanded nothing.

²³ The *ninth* and last fruit of the Word is praising and thanking. For we are not able to give God any work or service for all the kindness and grace he bestows upon us, except praise and thanks which also spring from the heart, and do not need many organs, bells, and loud voices. Faith truly teaches such praise and thanks as are here related of the shepherds, in that they returned to their flocks glorifying and praising God. They are indeed contented, although they have not become wealthier, although they are not more highly honored, although they do not eat and drink better, and are not obliged to do their daily duties better.

²⁴ See, in this Gospel you have a picture of a true Christian life, first according to its outward character, so that it glitters outwardly not at all, or very little in the eyes of the people, yea, is falsehood and the work of fools in the eyes of most people; but inwardly it is nothing but light, joy and salvation. Hence we see what the apostle means, when in Galatians 5:22 he relates the fruits of the Spirit and says: "*The fruits of the Spirit,*" that is, the works of faith,"* are love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control ;"* here there is no mention of persons, seasons, food, clothing, places or like chosen works of human device as we see swarming in the life of the Papists.

The Spiritual Interpretation of this Gospel

²⁵ But what it is to find Christ in such poverty, and what his swaddling clothes and manger signify, are explained in the previous Gospel; that his poverty teaches how we should find him in our neighbors, the lowliest and the most needy; and his swaddling clothes are the holy Scriptures; that in actual life we should incline to the needy; and in our studies and contemplative life only to the Scriptures; in order that Christ alone may become the man of both lives and that he may everywhere stand before us. We should shun the books of Aristotle, of the pope, and of all men, or read them in a way that we do not seek the edification of the soul in them; but with them make use of the time and this life, as one teaches a trade or civil law. However it is not in vain that St. Luke places Mary before Joseph, and both of them before the child and says: "*And they found both Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in the manger.*"

²⁶ Now we said before, Mary is the Christian church, Joseph, the servants of the church, as the bishops and pastors should be if they preach the Gospel. Here the church is preferred before the prelates of the church, as Christ also says in Luke 22:26: "*He that is the greater among you, let him become as the younger,*" although that is now reversed; it is also no wonder, since they rejected the Gospel and exalted the prattle of men. The Christian church retains now all the words of God in her heart and ponders them, compares them with one another and with the Scriptures. Therefore he who would find Christ must first find the Church. How should we know where Christ and his faith were,

if we did not know where his believers are? And he who would know anything of Christ must not trust himself nor build a bridge to heaven by his own reason; but he must go to the Church, attend and ask her.

²⁷ Now the Church is not wood and stone, but the company of believing people; one must hold to them, and see how they believe, live and teach; they surely have Christ in their midst. For outside of the Christian church there is no truth, no Christ, no salvation.

²⁸ From this it follows that it is unsafe and false that the pope or a bishop wishes to have himself alone believed, and that he poses as a master; for they all err and are inclined to err. But their teaching should be subject to the congregation of believers. The congregation should decide and judge what they teach; their judgment should stand, in order that Mary may be found before Joseph, the church be preferred to the preachers. For it was not Joseph but Mary who retains the words in her heart, ponders them, gathers them together and compares them. The apostle also taught this in 1 Corinthians 14:29-30 when he says: *“And let not the prophets speak by two or three, and let the others discern. But if a revelation be made to another sitting by, let the first keep silence.”*

²⁹ But at present the pope and his followers have become tyrants, have reversed this Christian, godly and apostolic order, established an entirely heathen and Pythagorean order of things, that they may say, lullaffen and alfenzen, that is, they talk silly about whatever they wish. No one criticises them, no one will oppose them, no one tells them to be quiet. And in this way they have quenched the Spirit so that among them one finds neither Mary, nor Joseph nor Christ; nothing but the rats, mice, vipers and serpents of their poisonous doctrines and hypocrisy.

³⁰ This is not a Gospel of strife; for it teaches Christian morals and works, it does not clearly and publicly establish the different articles of faith. Although in its spiritual teachings, (mysteriis), as has been shown, it is strong enough; but the spiritual teachings (mysteria) do not strive and contend. There must be clear, public passages that plainly publish the articles of our faith.

History

The Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise (1463-1525), requested that Martin Luther write a collection of sermons for each Sunday of the year for the benefit of ministers and the common people—those that have the Spirit—to exhort them in sound doctrine but also to convict the gainsayers who oppose the Word and true faith.

This sermon originates from what is commonly called Luther’s *Church Postil* collection. He wrote most of the sermons between 1521 and 1527, then supervised editorial assistance with Stephan Roth (1492-1546) until 1535 and Caspar Creuziger (1504-1548) until 1544. During that entire period over seventy-five editions of the collection were published. Many more editions were published after Luther’s death in 1546. This sermon can be found in the Erlangen edition 10, 161; Walch edition 11, 198; St. Louis edition 11, 144. It was translated into English by John Nicholas Lenker (1858-1929) and published in 1905. Except for his catechisms, Luther’s postils were his most influential writings for believers. |

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