

PSALM 96 AND LUKE 2:1-20

PSALM 96 IS A CALL TO WORSHIP THAT TELLS WHY GOD IS WORTHY OF OUR PRAISE. IT DESCRIBES THE WONDER AND JOY OF GOD'S DIRECT INTERVENTION IN THE WORLD HE CREATED AND LOVES.

THE PSALM CLOSES WITH PRAISE THAT GOD WILL COME TO JUDGE THE WORLD AND THE PEOPLE.

BUT WHAT THE PSALMIST COULD NOT HAVE IMAGINED IS THE AMAZING GRACE OF THE LORD GOD THAT WOULD OPEN THE DOORWAY FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN, AND THUS CHANGE THE OUTCOME OF GOD'S JUDGMENT.

FOR JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD AS LORD AND SAVIOR, HE CAME TO BRING THE TRUTH OF THE FATHER'S LOVE AND GRACE INTO THE WORLD.

THE OPENING WORDS OF THE HYMN WE JUST HEARD, DESCRIBES THE POWER AND BEAUTY OF GOD'S ACTION IN THIS WAY.

“O HOLY NIGHT THE STARS ARE BRIGHTLY SHINING,  
THIS IS THE NIGHT OF OUR DEAR SAVIOR'S BIRTH.”

TONIGHT IS INDEED A HOLY-SPECIAL NIGHT, A STRANGE- ONE MIGHT EVEN SAY A MAGICAL NIGHT; BUT OF COURSE MAGIC HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH IT.

WHAT REALLY MAKES THIS NIGHT SPECIAL AND HOLY IS OUR BELIEF AND INVESTMENT IN THE MIRACLE OF JESUS' INCARNATION AND BIRTH.

THE GIFT OF JESUS, OF GOD WRAPPED IN HUMAN FLESH, LIKE ANY OTHER GIFT, DOES US NO GOOD IF WE DO NOT OPEN IT.

ABOUT THE TRUTH OF JESUS CHRIST AND HIS BIRTH, AS WELL AS THE REASON HE WAS BORN- ONE MAN WROTE:

“THE COMING OF CHRIST BY WAY OF A BETHLEHEM MANGER SEEMS STRANGE AND STUNNING.

BUT WHEN WE TAKE HIM OUT OF THE MANGER AND INVITE HIM INTO OUR HEARTS, THEN THE MEANING UNFOLDS AND THE STRANGENESS VANISHES.”

THE TRUE BLESSING OF THIS HOLY NIGHT AND TOMORROW CENTERS AROUND JESUS BEING BORN IN OUR HEARTS, AND HIS LIFE BECOMING A PART OF OUR LIVES.

IT IS ONLY THEN WE CAN BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND THE MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS AND JESUS AS GOD'S GREAT AND UNIQUE GIFT OF LOVE TO THE WORLD.

ANOTHER LINE FROM “O HOLY NIGHT” DECLARES: “FALL ON YOUR KNEES-

O HEAR THE ANGEL'S VOICES O NIGHT DIVINE, O NIGHT WHEN CHRIST WAS BORN.”

THE GIFT OF GOD INCARNATE BOTH BRINGS US TO OUR KNEES AND RAISES US UP AGAIN.

THERE IS A STORY CALLED: “THE PARABLE OF THE BIRDS”, WHICH TELLS HOW ONE MAN WHO, WHILE A DECENT AND UPRIGHT FELLOW-DID NOT HAVE CHRIST IN HIS HEART.

ON CHRISTMAS EVE, HIS WIFE TRIED TO PERSUADE HIM TO ATTEND THE WORSHIP SERVICE, LIKE SHE DID EVERY YEAR.

HOWEVER THE MAN EXPLAINED HE DID NOT BELIEVE THE STORY OF JESUS' BIRTH.

HE ADDED, IT MADE NO SENSE TO HIM GOD WOULD DO SUCH A THING, AND HE DID NOT WANT TO GO AND PRETEND TO CELEBRATE WHAT HE DID NOT BELIEVE IN.

AND SO THE MAN STAYED HOME WHILE HIS WIFE AND CHILDREN WENT TO CHURCH.

SHORTLY AFTER THEY DROVE AWAY IT BEGAN TO SNOW-SLOWLY AT FIRST, BUT THEN IT QUICKLY FELL FAST AND HEAVY.

AS THE MAN SAT AND WAITED FOR HIS FAMILY TO RETURN HE HEARD A THUD OUTSIDE THE HOUSE, FOLLOWED BY A SIMILAR SOUND, AND THEN STILL ANOTHER THUD.

HE OPENED THE FRONT DOOR TO LOOK OUT AND HE SAW A FLOCK OF BIRDS WHO HAD BEEN CAUGHT IN THE STORM, HUDDLING MISERABLY IN THE YARD.

HE HAD COMPASSION FOR THE CREATURES AND SO HE, THREW ON A HAT AND COAT AND WENT TO OPEN HIS BARN DOOR TO PROVIDE THEM WITH SHELTER.

HE TURNED ON THE BARN LIGHT, AND SCATTERED SEED JUST INSIDE THE DOOR. THEN HE MOVED AWAY BUT NOT ONE WENT INTO THE SHELTER.

HE TRIED TO GET BEHIND THE FLOCK AND CHASE THEM INSIDE BUT THE BIRDS SCATTERED IN EVERY DIRECTION, EXCEPT WHERE HE WANTED THEM TO GO.

HE REALIZED THEY WERE AFRAID OF HIM AND DID NOT UNDERSTAND HE WAS TRYING TO HELP THEM, INDEED TO SAVE THEIR LIVES.

THE THOUGHT OCCURRED TO HIM: "IF I COULD ONLY BECOME A BIRD, FOR A FEW MINUTES. THEN I COULD LEAD THEM TO SAFETY."

JUST AT THAT MOMENT, THE CHURCH BELLS TOLLED, MARKING THE END OF THE CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE.

LISTENING TO THE BELLS SOUNDING THE GLAD TIDINGS OF CHRISTMAS, HE MAN SANK TO HIS KNEES IN THE SNOW AS THE MEANING OF CHRIST'S BIRTH CAME TO HIM.

"NOW I UNDERSTAND" HE WHISPERED "NOW I SEE WHY YOU HAD TO DO IT". HE PRAYERFULLY SAID.

INDEED, GOD IN JESUS CAME DOWN TO EARTH TO HELP US UNDERSTAND HIS LOVE.

HE CAME AS ONE OF US, SO THAT WE WOULD NOT BE TOO FRIGHTENED TO ACCEPT THE GIFT OF GRACE AND LIFE HE OFFERS.

THIS IS ONE WAY JESUS CAN COME OUT OF THE MANGER AND INTO OUR HEARTS.

THROUGH LUKE'S GOSPEL, GOD, ALSO INVITES US TO TAKE JESUS OUT OF THE MANGER AND TAKE HIM INTO OUR HEARTS.

GOD GIVES AS THE EXAMPLE OF MARY TO FOLLOW, AFTER SHE HEARD THE SHEPHERD'S EXTRAORDINARY TALE ABOUT ANGELS VOICES FILLING THE NIGHT SKY WITH THE FIRST CHRISTMAS CAROLS.

THE BIBLE SAYS SHE TREASURED ALL THAT HAPPENED AND PONDERED IT IN HER HEART.

OR IN PLAINER AND LESS POETIC ENGLISH, MARY STORED WITHIN HER MEMORY THE EVENTS OF THAT HOLY NIGHT.

SHE ADDED THEM TO THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE MIRACLE OF HER CHILD'S CONCEPTION BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.

MARY DID THIS SO THAT SOME TIME LATER, SHE COULD CONSIDER EVERYTHING, WHEN SHE WAS NOT SO TIRED, OR SO OVERWHELMED WITH ALL THAT HAD HAPPENED THAT NIGHT.

THIS EVENING LET US NOT DISTANCE OURSELVES FROM THE STORY, BUT INSTEAD LET US EACH DRAW NEARER TO MARY AND JOSEPH, AND THE NEWBORN BABY.

LET US CONSIDER AND GIVE THANKS TO GOD FOR JESUS. LET US TREASURE THE NEWS THAT HIS BIRTH CHANGED HISTORY, AND HIS SACRIFICE CHANGED OUR DESTINY.

IN THE BIRTH OF JESUS, GOD HAS GIVEN OUR WEARY AND STRUGGLING WORLD A REASON TO REJOICE.

IN THE CRY OF AN INFANT, THERE IS HOPE FOR ALL WHO CRY. AND BY THE LIGHT OF A STAR, PEOPLE ARE GIVEN HELP TO FIND THEIR WAY BACK TO GOD.

ON THIS HOLY NIGHT, WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN GOD'S SON JESUS- THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD WRAPPED IN SWADDLING CLOTHES AND LYING IN A MANGER.

HERE IS ANOTHER STORY THAT REMINDS US ABOUT THE WONDER OF THIS NIGHT.

WHILE A GROUP OF MISSIONARIES WERE IN AN ORPHANAGE THEY READ THE CHRISTMAS STORY TO THE CHILDREN.

THEN THE KIDS WERE GIVEN MATERIALS AND ASKED TO MAKE THEIR OWN MANGER SCENE.

ONE SIX-YEAR-OLD BOY DID SOMETHING UNUSUAL IN HIS PICTURE--HE PUT TWO BABIES IN THE MANGER.

THROUGH A TRANSLATOR ONE MISSIONARY ASKED HIM WHY, HE REPLIED:

“WHEN MARY LAID THE BABY IN THE MANGER, JESUS LOOKED AT ME AND ASKED ME IF I HAD A PLACE TO STAY.

I TOLD HIM I HAVE NO MAMA AND PAPA, SO I DON'T HAVE ANY PLACE TO STAY.

THEN JESUS TOLD ME I COULD STAY WITH HIM, SO I GOT INTO THE MANGER.

THEN JESUS LOOKED AT ME AND HE TOLD ME I COULD STAY WITH HIM FOREVER.”

THAT YOUNG BOY TRULY GRASPED THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS.

HE UNDERSTOOD DEEP WITHIN HIS SOUL THE ABOUT GIFT OF JESUS OUR SAVIOR, WHO IS ALSO EMANUEL-GOD WITH US.

IN THE BOY'S STORY WE CAN PERHAPS FIND A CONNECTION TO OUR OWN RECOGNITION THAT JESUS WELCOMES US.

PERHAPS WE CAN HEAR CHRIST'S INVITATION TO US IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY.

INDEED, JESUS INVITES US TO BE WITH HIM ALWAYS. THIS WAS THE REASON HE CAME TO EARTH.

THE FINAL VERSE OF THE HYMN, “O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM”, OFFERS THIS PRAYER FOR ALL WHO WOULD RECEIVE THE HOLY CHRISTMAS PRESENT SENT BY GOD:

“O HOLY CHILD OF BETHLEHEM, DESCEND TO US, WE PRAY;  
CAST OUT OUR SIN AND ENTER IN, BE BORN IN US TODAY.”

AND SO, ON THIS HOLY NIGHT LET US OPEN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS TO THE LORD, SO WE MAY BE DRAWN INTO THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S LOVE.

LET US JOIN OUR VOICES WITH THE HEAVENLY HOST THAT WE MAY SING TO THE LORD OUR SONGS OF THANKS AND PRAISE.

LET US BE AN INN KEEPER WHO MAKES ROOM FOR CHRIST IN OUR HEARTS.

AND LIKE THE SHEPHERDS LET US LOOK AT ALL GOD HAS DONE, AND THEN SHARE THE GOOD NEWS.

MAY OUR THOUGHTS LINGER IN BETHLEHEM, THIS NIGHT AND TOMORROW, SO WE MAY BE EVER THANKFUL FOR THE WONDER OF CHRIST'S BIRTH, AND THROUGH HIM OUR REBIRTH AS CHILDREN OF GOD.

THEN, AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY, MAY WE FOLLOW WHERE THE SAVIOR LEADS US, AND SO PUT TO USE THE GIFT OF HIMSELF WE ARE GIVEN ON THIS HOLY NIGHT. AMEN

LET US PRAY: GOOD AND GRACIOUS GOD, WE GIVE YOU THANKS THAT ON THIS HOLY NIGHT YOU GAVE US YOUR SON, THE LORD OF THE UNIVERSE, WRAPPED IN SWADDLING CLOTHES, THE SAVIOR OF ALL LYING IN A MANGER.

DRAW US, WE PRAY INTO THE MYSTERY OF YOUR LOVE SO WE MAY SING YOUR GLORY LIKE THE ANGELS, AND JOIN WITH THE SHEPHERDS TO WORSHIP YOU.

HEAR OUR PRAYERS FOR THE WORLD AND OURSELVES. WE PRAY FOR THOSE IN NEED OF HELP OR COMFORT, IN NEED OF HEALING OR COMPANIONSHIP. SEND US OUT INTO THE WORLD TO SHARE YOUR LOVE BY SERVING OTHERS IN THE NAME OF CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN

SERMON SUMMARY: LUKE 2:1-20

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