



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON

LUKE 2:1-20

DECEMBER 24, 2021

"THEIR FIRST...NOELLE"

Right around Christmas in 2011 I got a call from a young woman. She told me they weren't members of my congregation - First Lutheran in Minot. But she'd driven by our building many times and that's why she called. She said she and her fiancé were expecting a child. I assumed the call was to inquire about getting married at First and having a baby baptized. I congratulated her and asked when the baby was due. That's when the phone went quiet for a minute, then she said, *"we're not sure at this point – it depends."*

'Oh, depends on what' I asked. *"The doctors have told us our baby won't survive."* It had something to do with chromosomes – missing some if I recall. So, the birth depended on if the child died before it came to term, in which case they would deliver her shortly thereafter, or if she (it was a girl) went full term and died right after she was delivered. I was by now fumbling big time for what to say, and as they say, when you don't know what to say, why not suggest a meeting? She said sure, and sometime after Christmas the three of us met.

Nicest young folks too. The dad in me ached for them, but pretty soon I was fumbling all over again. The pastor in me felt the need to explain I couldn't baptize their child in the womb nor if she died before I could come- if that was a concern of theirs. I told them I would come to the hospital and wait and do so if I could. When I did finally get the call, from the hospital, they told me their baby had died sometime the previous day before being delivered. Would I come and bless her? I couldn't get there fast enough.

This was their first child, and they named her ... Noelle. How lovely ... how "Christmasy". The word as you may know has French origins meaning "Christmas", and in English Noel means, *"joyous Christmas carol."* There was not much joy in the hearts of my young family as they sat with their "first ... Noelle." *"How still we see thee lie"* is not always a treasured lullaby. But the faces of those parents softened after months of sorrow, brightening as they looked upon their Noelle. For a change, I stopped fumbling for words and did what I'm supposed to do - read promises we all have because of our Savior's "first noel."

When you don't know what else to say, *"for unto you is born a Savior who is Christ the Lord"* is a good thing to say. I said other things our Savior said, like *"do not hinder the little children from coming to me, for to such belong the kingdom of God"* and *"is not a sparrow sold for two pennies, and yet not one of them falls to the ground without your heavenly Father knowing it. So, be of good cheer, are you not or more value than they?"*

Most of you here tonight know the particulars of the “First Noel” of long ago. By faith a virgin conceived in her womb the very Son of God. The creator who had knit Mary together in her own mother’s womb lived dependent on hers. By faith Joseph became a father to his own Heavenly Father. That’s all understandable, right? That’s the mystery of faith, and what a blessing to be able to surrender the need to say we must know everything, and simply say “I believe.”

For those who favor the relational side of faith, the “first noel” - offers you the loyalty amidst adversity of Mary and Joseph. It offers Joseph’s tenderness which says a firm but polite “no” to bitterness. And lest we forget, this wasn’t just a love story between God and humanity. Mary and Joseph, in adversity, gave the writer of I Corinthians 13 a full-on example of love that “*bears, believes, hopes and endures all things*”. For those looking for the spiritual side of this story – well I got lots of books in my office I could loan you to help you plumb those depths. It would not be wrong however, to sum it up this way – God is love, love is fragile, and apparently when it starts it tends to start tiny.

Ten years ago, about this time, I took a phone call. I don’t recall our conversations exactly oozing faith. I knew the faith my young visitors had, they had in Jesus, so even if it’s small or fragile, if it’s in Him it’s enough. Far as I recall they did not dwell on the loss they were about to suffer nor the unfairness of it all. I knew that they knew they would be sad, but something was sustaining them – I choose to presume it was their recollection of the first noel - the story of God in a cradle – God who says over and over, “*I am with you ... I will be with you*”... and they believed he was and would be.

They named their daughter “Christmas.” How cool is that? At a funeral a few evenings later in our Church’s chapel, a handful of us gathered sorrowful, but certain that the first noel the angels did say, *for unto you in born this day ...* was for the little Noelle that before us lay. I mentioned in my remarks how the very first thing her eyes would ever see was a Savior so obviously familiar with what birth is about, and so was more like her than she could have ever imagined.

Christ’s nativity and life dignifies every human nativity and life. Yes, Christmas means all that. It’s wonderful to think that God from his heaven is with us – and in fact a lot of religions say things like that. But none of them mean by that what we Christians can say tonight ... unto us is born a Savior ... born to give you your second birth. A perfect one – all of us who in God’s eyes are just an infant lowly, and by grace an infant holy! Noel, Noel, Noel Noel ... glory to the newborn King of Israel. AMEN