

Pastor Gregory Paul Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/24/2007, Christmas Eve  
Luke 2:1-20

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>10</sup>And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. <sup>11</sup>For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11, KJV)

Some people say it is good to be to be healthy, or handsome, or wealthy, or respected. Well, no harm there. I believe all that, and I bet you do too. But on this good night, Christmas Eve night, we are invited to enlarge our perspective, to see the forest for the trees, and to rejoice in this truth: It is good to have a Saviour! Other things are good too, naturally, but this is good in a supreme way: It is good to have a Saviour.

What a sweet word that is: Saviour. It means that someone comes along who does for you what you cannot do yourself. You are at the end of your rope. You have done all you can do and you cannot do any more. If you are going to make it, it will be because someone comes along who lends you a hand — that sweet hand that pulls you from the raging river or performs the surgery that gives you another chance in life or does the perfect thing, the needful thing.

You might have heard the recent story of the father and three children who got lost while looking for the perfect Christmas tree.<sup>1</sup> This took place near a town called Paradise — Paradise, California — only that town would not have lived up to its name if a savior had not come along.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, 38-year-old Frederick Dominguez and his three children — Christopher, 18, Alexis, 15, and Joshua, 12 — piled into their pickup truck and set out to find the perfect Christmas tree. They knew this spot in the mountains, just a half-hour away, where the woods were thick and where they expected to find a million perfect Christmas trees.

They found their tree, cut it down and began dragging it back to the road, except that they could not find the road. It had not been snowing when they reached the hills, but soon it started, and the snow disoriented them.

They ended up lost in those hills for three days, dressed in only light jackets, sweatshirts and sneakers, with no cell phone reception. They were heroes — it sounds like it to me. They survived those days and that tough weather by sticking together, finding whatever shelter they could, sharing the warmth of their bodies with each other, telling jokes and stories, keeping their spirits up.

And at last, they were rescued. In their resourcefulness, they had taken tree branches and had laid them out in the snow, spelling the word “help.” And a helicopter pilot making his final pass of the day saw their signal and rescued them. Father and children climbed into that helicopter and, God bless them, gobbled up all the military rations they could find there.

As brave and as resourceful as they had been, they had been getting near the end of the line. They were weak and cold and hungry. But then a saviour came along, rescued them, and now they are happy again.

Well, on that first Christmas night, it was as if our whole blooming world spelled out “help,” and, thanks be to God, the Saviour came! It was as if we cut down the biggest California Redwoods we could find, dragged them to some Midwestern prairie, carefully arranged them to spell the word “Help!” with an exclamation mark at the end, our Maker saw it, and helped:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thestar.com/printArticle/287669>

<sup>10</sup>And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. <sup>11</sup>For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

Now, the first folk on the face of this earth to hear the good news of Christmas were the shepherds. Long ago, when I was a young man, I spent a summer working on a dairy farm. One of the things I learned then was the importance of the community veterinarian. The vet is a crucial part of the local economy. He is known to the farmers and their families, and it's a big crisis in the community when the vet grows old and retires. Will the new vet be as good? Will he be as faithful? Will he help us take good care of these animals?

So it was with the shepherd in the towns and villages of ancient Israel. A family might own only a single sheep or two, but those sheep were important to the family. They trusted their sheep over to the shepherd, family and by family, and if that fellow was a good shepherd, he benefited the whole village. He could lead the sheep to green pasture. He could let them drink at a calm stretch of water, where they would not drown in the current. He knew the sheep by name. He would even defend them against wolf and bear, at risk of his own life, if need be.

Imagine such a shepherd on that holy night. Earlier in the week, he rises at dawn and gets ready for the work ahead of him tending his flock. He replenishes his shepherd's bag with food — with dried figs, olives, raisins, cheese and bread. He has a clay flask or a hollow gourd for scooping water to drink. Mrs. Shepherd prepares breakfast for him. He puts his heavy cloak of sheepskin, goat hair, camel hair, or homespun wool over his shoulders. That cloak will be his shelter day and night, rain or snow. He has his rod dangling from his belt. He has his staff. He tousles the head of his children, and he is off to work. He might be

gone for days or even weeks at a time.<sup>2</sup>

On this particular night, something stupendous happens! While he and his fellow shepherds are keep watch over their flocks, lo, the angel of the Lord comes upon them, and the glory of the Lord shines round about them: “and they were sore afraid.” Naturally, they were afraid. Who would not be?

Then, the angel of the Lord calms their fears with that great text this sermon is built upon:

<sup>10</sup>And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. <sup>11</sup>For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.(Luke 2:10-11, KJV)

And then there is a glorious crowd of heavenly folk:

<sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, <sup>14</sup>Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.(Luke 2:13-14, KJV)

The shepherds march right on over there to Bethlehem to see this newborn Saviour. And sure enough, there he is! They see Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger.

In the course of time, the shepherd goes back home. Mrs. Shepherd gives him a hug and welcomes him home. But she sees that there is something different about her man. He is peaceful. He has never been much of a talker, and surely he distrusts his ability to put into words the majesty of what he has seen. But, bit by bit, he tells her the story. And the pinnacle

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<sup>2</sup> This description of the common attire of the shepherd comes from a book by the father of our member David Kiehl: *Everyday Life in Bible Times*, by Erich H. Kiehl, Copyright 1947, 1969, and 1995 by Concordia Publishing.

of that story is that unto them a Saviour has been born.

“You know, Dear,” he tells his wife. “I’m getting older, and my work is getting harder for me. Those hills seem steeper. My balance is not as good as it used to be. I am willing to fight wolf or bear for my sheep. I am willing to do it, only I am not so confident as I used to be that I will prevail. And if I should die out there on the hillside... if I should fall off a cliff or be killed by a bear or simply have a heart attack, I have been worrying for years now about what will become of you and the kids. And in a way, nothing has changed. I am still old, the hillsides are still dangerous, the disorienting snows still come, the animals are still fierce, and if I should die, things are still going to be rough for you. And yet, in another way, *everything* has changed! We needed help. Our whole world

needed help. If I could have cut down the cedars of Lebanon, arranged them on the hillside to spell out “help!” I would have done it, only before this Christmas Eve, I was not so sure that there was Anyone to help. Now I am sure. Now I am sure that neither life nor death, height nor depth, nor things present nor things to come, nor heaven nor earth, nor kings nor potentates, nor anything else of that sort is going to be able to keep us from happiness, for unto us a Saviour is born.”

In this way, in his plain shepherd’s way, there comes to be an echo on earth of that joy in heaven on that first Christmas eve: Glory to God in the highest, and peace to you people on earth.

And to this Saviour born in Bethlehem be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.