

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, Wash.
December 26, 2010**

Luke 2:20

The Return from Christmas

- 1. The shepherds' return**
- 2. Our return**

Hymns: 56 – 366 – 64

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

Luke 2:20 – The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

You've returned! You're back! For some of you, this is perhaps the third day in a row that you have come to God's house. It's not often that we have a Friday-Saturday-Sunday stretch of services at Christmastime. But this year we certainly do, and we're here for an "ordinary" Sunday after the holidays.

What kind of feeling might a church member have as they come to God's house for the third day in a row? We've had the sacred evening of Christmas Eve and the high of a festival Christmas Day. Perhaps this leaves a feeling of "What more there could be?" Even for a minister putting together a December 26th sermon after Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, there can be a feeling of "What more is there to say?"

Not only have we returned to God's house for the third time this week, we also are experiencing a "return" on a different level. Christmas is over. The festival day has past, leaving a return to the normal life and work that the average person has. How do you feel about your "return" to life?

To focus our thoughts on this, today we focus on the return that we hear about in Luke 2, the return of the shepherds to their normal life. Luke 2:20 tells us, "*And the shepherds returned.*" We add the logical thought "to their fields and to their way of life." Yet what was different? **Today let's consider "The Return from Christmas":**

- 1. The shepherds' return**
- 2. Our return**

1 – As we start to think about the shepherds' return, we should really remember what their life was like to begin with. What kind of life did they lead? Shepherds played a vital part in society in Bible times, because sheep were the staple meat for the people. But shepherds were a poor class of people. They usually were not an educated group. No extensive schooling was necessary for their life's occupation.

Shepherds lived a rather simple life, perhaps bordering on boring. Day to day life could become rather monotonous. Obviously, they were responsible for taking care of their flocks, which would be a repetitive routine of leading them to water and to green pastures – Feeding and watering them day after day. It could also be a very lonely life, often led far from the bustling daily life in towns. It was an obscure life, albeit important, for sheep were a staple meat in the Jewish diet. It was a simple life.

These shepherds had had an earthshaking evening. They had been out in their fields during the "down time" of night. But their sleepy night was wakened by a host of heavenly angelic messengers who shattered their quiet evening with the majestic news that the King of Israel had been born. Believing this good news they had made their way to the manger scene, seeing the newborn Babe and believing the gospel message that this was Christ the Lord, the Savior of the world. What a momentous night this was for their lives and for the world!

And now? "*The shepherds returned.*" What would their return to life be like? In the

immediate future, we hear in Luke 2: “*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*” Their immediate return was filled with a buzz. Undoubtedly they were chattering and excited as they returned that evening and as they spent their next day. Undoubtedly they shared the news with whomever they came into contact with. **Their lives would not be the same!**

We wonder about their longer term “return” to life. Scripture, of course, is silent about the shepherds’ life beyond Christmas evening. We’re left to speculate concerning the rest of the story. How long did their joy last as day after day, week after week, year after year they tended to their flocks in their monotonous routine? Did it last? Were there campfire stories that continued? Did the joy remain in their hearts? Was it tough to return to what many would call a dull life? Did Christmas night become a distant memory? Might some of them even have lost their faith in the Christmas Babe of Bethlehem? Are all of the shepherds in heaven?

2 – Interesting questions. But since we don’t know concrete answers, we won’t spend much time speculating. Rather, let’s ask these questions of you as you return to “regular life” after a couple days of a Christmas high. How will your return go?

For many, it will be a meaningless return. A meaningless return does not mean that no celebrating was done. No, in fact high celebrating might have taken place – parties, family get-togethers, Christmas music, and happy conversations. But perhaps the meaning of the season passes by many. Perhaps the celebrating was done only by repetition, and tradition. A person could return to everyday existence unmoved and unaffected. Perhaps it was a time when many felt the rush of simply trying to “fit in” all the activities that they’re normally supposed to do, but don’t take the lessons of Christmas with them beyond the holiday.

The meaningless return to Christmas can be exhibited in people becoming out-of-

character in a way for the holidays, and then return to their “normal” personality after it’s all over.

- Some might become mysteriously friendly and warm at the office when Christmas carols are in the air and speak excitedly of where and how they were going to spend and enjoy the holidays. But now they are just as curt and unfriendly as they were before the decorations went up.
- A husband might feel the Christmas spirit and give up his “distant” ways toward his wife for the holidays and return to them unaffected when Christmas is over.
- A wife might be pleasant and civil toward her husband because “It’s the holidays, after all,” and go back to her cold ways when it’s over.
- Some might “make up” for a time with their rival and even drop them a Christmas card in the mail, but after the holidays the grudge continues.
- Some might become generous in their charitable giving, but go back to being Scrooge after the holidays.
- Some contribute to their church in December, but after the holidays their poor Christian stewardship of treasures ends as they do not tend to the work of their congregation well during the rest of the year.

The meaningless return leaves such a person empty as they go back to the normal routine.

Another option for many people is to have a cynical return to normal life.

Maybe Christmas is only an escape mechanism, a diversion for some extra eating, drinking, and other excesses. Christmas is

looked at as a person might attend a retreat, escaping from the daily routine for a while, but then having to regretfully and cynically return to daily life.

Perhaps there are some among us who hate their life and are dreading their return. Maybe there are problems at work that have become unpleasant and intolerable. Maybe some young people here who are in school are having tremendous problems with a bully or with a class, and they return cynically to what they would call their “miserable life.” For others, maybe they live a lonely life and dread their return to it, cynical and unchanged.

For others, perhaps they feel only disappointment coming out of the whole month of December. They feel disappointed because not everything got done that should have been done. Maybe the lights never got up or the cards weren’t finished. Maybe a trip was cancelled that they really wanted to take. Their Christmas ends only in disappointment and cynicism as it’s all over. Or maybe the disappointment lies in the debt that you incurred and will need to pay off in the new year. After all, studies have shown that Christmas debt for the average American takes about 3½ months to repay!

Worse yet, the cynical return for some might be evident in their attitude that “Christmas is for other people” to begin with. It’s just for the children, some may think. Or “It’s just for more religious people.” Maybe you’re glad it’s over for that reason. Maybe you’ve been left exhausted and not feeling the Christmas joy like others around you, and you’re frustrated because of it. **How sad it would be for us to return to life with a cynical attitude!**

How should we return? If doubt remains in your mind, we need to reread Luke 2:20: “*And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*” **We pray that we have a meaningful return to our daily life. Can it be so?**

To have a meaningful return from Christmas, we really have to ask ourselves if we were there to begin with. Were you there?

In the Czech Republic, manger scenes have a unique twist. They have the regular figures that we see in many manger sets: Mary and Joseph, Baby Jesus, animals, and shepherds. But Czech nativity sets have an unexpected feature. They have three additional figures. One man is bringing Jesus a box of salt, which in earlier times was a scarce and valuable item. Another brings Jesus a carp, which is the traditional Czech specialty for Christmas dinner. And a woman brings a round loaf of bread, a traditional gift to welcome visitors. Why are these figures there? They represent the Czech people. The Czech people have come to see the newborn Savior and to bring him their gifts. (Illustration from Pastor Mark Grubbs)

I think this is a great idea! Or perhaps you could have a figure in your nativity scene that looks exactly like you! This reminds each of us that each of us, in spirit, also kneels there before the Christchild who came to be our Savior. And they remind us that each of us has the privilege of bringing him our gifts, gifts to thank him for his gift of salvation to us.

So we ask ourselves, “Were you there this Christmas?” Did you see a figure of yourself in the manger scene? You should have come with the shepherds to gaze into the manger at a baby boy. You should have looked and seen God incarnate who was born for you. You should have seen salvation wrapped in swaddling clothes, the One who has come to pay the price of your sin and buy back your eternal soul. Were you there?

If you were truly there, this will affect your return. Certainly the decorations will come down, the tree will be put at the curb, and the traditions will be past. The carols will be over, the holly put away, and the greeting cards put aside. The students will return to school and workers to work. But will that stifle your return that should be “glorifying and praising” God for all the things that you have heard and seen?

Think about what makes life beyond Christmas meaningful:

- Are you ashamed and fearful because of the sins that have dirtied your life? Then continue to remember that, as our second lesson said: *“When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons... So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”* (Gal. 4)
- Are you anxious about the future? Then be joyful, because God promises to guide us safely to heaven, so we can rejoice with the Apostle Paul: *“I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8)
- It means comfort for your conscience, cheer in your sadness, comfort in your crosses, strength in your suffering, and assurances concerning your future.
- It means we look forward to the rest of the Church Year in our worship services, where we recount the story of our salvation.
- It means that we eagerly desire to use our talents for God’s glory, both in our personal life and in our church.
- It means that you will look to serve your fellow man in your personal life, eager to do good works. It means that you will see

your job and your vocation as a calling from God as you work productively to serve in his world.

Such is the nature of a meaningful return from Christmas.

This will be all the more meaningful when we realize that this could be the last Christmas that we are here to celebrate. A new year dawns ahead, and we may not be here in a year’s time. This sharpens our look at what Christmas is all about and what its true meaning is. The effects of Christmas for us go farther ahead, past a cross and an empty tomb. They go past our own birth and ahead to our own death or the end of this world, as we see the Savior who gave his life so we could spend an eternity enjoying heaven. **Such is the nature of a meaningful return from Christmas, no matter the circumstances of our daily life! This perspective on what Christmas and Easter have done for us are the beginning of a meaningful return.**

So what was it like for the shepherds? Did the joy and praise last? And what will it be like for us? A meaningless return? A cynical return?

May God grant us a meaningful return to daily life from Christmastime, as we see the full impact of the Christmas story on our life – Christ the Lord was born! And this permeates every part of what we do. It is our life! May this cause us to “glorify and praise God for all the things that we have seen and heard.” Amen.

Adapted from sermon outline and thoughts by Pastor Hartwig M. Schwehn, *Concordia Pulpit*, 1956, CPH. St. Louis, MO.