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Title: Christmas Promises For You

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [Isaiah 9:2,6-7](#)

Text: [Luke 2:1-20](#)

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One picture is worth a thousand words; one look can speak volumes. Will you look carefully with me tonight at the picture of Christmas? In the many faces, surely you will see the Christmas promises, *for us*.

The first face of Christmas is found in a newborn child. But this child's birth did not take place in December, but early on a morning in September, 63 B.C. He was born at the Oxhead in the Palatine Quarter of the city of Rome. A messenger stood ready, and immediately upon hearing, "It's a boy!" raced to the Senate building and announced to the waiting assembly, "The ruler of the world is born." The child was named Octavius and at age 20 he, along with Lepidus and Marc Anthony, ruled the Roman Empire following the assassination of Julius Caesar. At age 33, having removed the two, he stood alone. Octavius was indeed "the ruler of the world." He was declared by the Roman Senate to be "Caesar Augustus." More than any other member of his family, Octavius made Caesar a title that echoed through the ages. At his bidding ships of war sailed; at his word legions marched. When Octavius was 66, he still stood astride the world like a titan, one foot on the land, one foot on the sea. He was the ultimate face of power. In that same 66th year, in a remote village of no consequence in his vast empire, another birth announcement was made. It was also a boy and also one who shall come to rule the world. ¹

There is no evidence whatsoever that Caesar Augustus had any knowledge that he had been used as an instrument of God. He is the first face of the Christmas promise for us when he issued a decree "...that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their towns to be registered." (Luke 2:1-3) Pilgrims traveled all over the Holy Land, the poor responding to the empire wanting something more from them. Look into their faces and you will see "...the people who walked in darkness... those who lived in a land

of deep darkness.”(Isaiah 9:2a,c) They long for the Christmas promise that a great light will shine. They have yet to see it. They are simply Jewish peasants who feel the weight of the “ruler of the world.”

Within the crowd are two faces of interest. They are headed to tonight’s destination. Unwittingly, Caesar Augustus sent them there and by doing so, fulfills the ancient Christmas promise, *for us*, that in “Bethlehem, in the land of Judah...least among the rulers of Judah...comes a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” (Matthew 2:6)

Mary and Joseph settle into their accommodations. You know where they are. Not in a palatial palace in the Palatine fit for the birth of king but a place of animals because “there was no room in the inn.” It was a lean-to on the side of a home, or a cave nearby or most likely, a room under a home, a stable for the animals during the winter. How long were they in this place before the time came for her to deliver, for active labor to begin? Luke suggests immediately. The walk was long and hard. Now in the stable, it is time for the real work. Contractions are stronger, closer together. Is this the picture of the Christmas promise, *for us*? Is it found on the pained face of a young mother giving birth, on the face of an anxious father assisting, in the bloody mess of delivery? This is, *for us*?

At the very time, Mary gives birth, there is an explosion in the sky over the Judean hills. Shepherds, “...keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” (Luke 2:8-9) Of course, they are terrified. When the night lights up like it never, ever has before, not once over all of the years of keeping watch over their flock at night, it shatters reality. Terrified shepherds--these are the people who truly walked in darkness. They lived much of their lives in the darkness of the night. They were poorer than the pilgrims flooding into Bethlehem, outcasts of society who are considered unclean.

A lone angel in the heaven shares the Christmas promise, *for us*—the “good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” (Luke 2:11) Then, as if to make sure the shepherds understood that this promise was real, the sky lights up with an army of angels, “a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”(Luke 2:14)

Then the angels depart and as they leave, we see the picture of shepherds, still dirty and unkempt outcasts. But now, instead of terror on their faces, we see curiosity, anticipation, maybe even hope that the promises for us

that they have heard all their lives, had finally been fulfilled. It's no wonder that they turned to one another and said, "Let's go see this thing which the Lord has made known to us." "So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger." (Luke 2:16)

It's the picture we've been waiting to see. The picture that communicates the Christmas promise for "a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12b). Oh, what a picture! Look carefully again. It's why you've come tonight. See Mary looking into the face of Jesus? One picture is worth a thousand words; one look can speak volumes. As she treasured all that she'd heard and pondered everything in her heart. I'm confident that she thinks: "You are so beautiful, so beautiful to me. You're everything I hope for, everything I need."²

And if you dare to look into his face and his face alone tonight, you find the very same thing because he is beautiful. He is not just a beautiful baby. He is everything we hope for and everything we need because this baby we call Jesus is Emmanuel, he is God with us.

This is the picture of our Christmas promise. It's not found in the powerful Caesar Augustus ruling a vast empire or pilgrims finding a place in Bethlehem or even young couple bedding down in a stable. It's not in a fireworks display of angels or terrified shepherds. It is a child conceived in a virgin, born as a son and named "Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." (Matthew 1:23c)

Emmanuel. God with us. That's the Christmas promise, *for you*. Not, just *for us*. It is *for you*. It's personal. Something you need, something you hope for. Emmanuel means you don't have to be alone, that your problems, even your death doesn't have to be the end. The arrival of Jesus tells us the most important thing about God. God wanted to be with us.

Even though the world was a mess, and Lord knows, this year, it is still a terrible mess. Even though lives were broken and families were fractured, and Lord knows, they still are. Even though there was pain, sickness, and even death all around and yes, we know there still is, God didn't turn His back on us.

The God who made us, the God who breathed life in us came down to Bethlehem to a stable, to a manger. What kind of God would do that? The very God that lies now in the manger, that we see face to face. In Him, the Christmas promise has a face and the face is Jesus.

The promises of Christmas---hope, and peace, joy, and love can be yours tonight because they are *for you*. Even though we say singing Silent Night and lighting candles is the most important thing at a Christmas Eve service, we know it's not. The most important thing is that personal moment when you again look into the face of Jesus. When you look into his face and take him into your heart, you have an incredible gift.

The gift means that you don't have to be defeated by the sins and failures of your past. You don't have to have anxiety and uncertainty about the bad things that may come in your future. You don't have to be defeated by your inadequacies and weaknesses that you know are deep inside of you. Because this baby, Jesus, comes to us tonight with this promise, *for you*. "My father loves you and I go to a cross so that I'll wipe your slate clean. I'll hold your future even beyond death in the palm of my hand. I'll be your guide and your friend and your Savior if you let me."³ Won't you let him? I pray so because Jesus is everything you hoped for; he is everything you need. What a gift. So open that gift tonight, won't you? Open it by opening your heart. As we ready our candles to shine the light of Christ here or wherever you are, open your heart to the Christ child so that he can be born again in you this night. Let him be your guide, your friend, your Savior for he is the light that came into the darkness.

Stand, sing, share the light of Christ for this is the Christmas promise, *for you*.

¹ Craddock, Fred. The Surprise and Joy of Advent. The Living Pulpit. Oct-Dec, 1997, p. 6

²You are So Beautiful. Billy Preston and Bruce Fisher. Preston grew up playing the organ in church, originally wrote the lyrics about God. Made a hit by Joe Crocker on the album, I Can Stand a Little Rain, 1974.

³ Christmas Presence, J. Ortberg, 12/13/2014.