



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Scott E. Schul:**

**Christmas Eve: December 24, 2020**

**Sermon Title: "Old Bethlehem"**

**Gospel Text: Luke 2:1-20**

"Aw come on God! Not again! I am SO done with this year!" Have you *said* or *thought* that a few times this year? I have. This is *not* the year *any* of us wanted. Many of our dear ones have lost their lives due to the pandemic. There have been other lesser but still substantial impacts too. Vacations cancelled. Businesses failed. Social opportunities obliterated. Jobs lost. Work routines re-shuffled. Futures altered. And classrooms converted to computer screens. 2020 has been a mess.

Even the church hasn't been immune. For the sake of everyone's wellbeing this Christmas Eve, we're worshipping outside, and not in our beautiful indoor sanctuary. Just like you, I feel like saying, "Aw come on God! Not again! I am SO done with this year!"

Of course we all know this isn't the first time God's people have been frustrated, exasperated, and maybe even a little angry at how a year has turned out. On this Christmas Eve, I can think of no better example to share with you than *Joseph*. As we contemplate the Christmas story, consider the kind of year *Joseph* was having.

The young woman he was engaged to wed was going to have a baby that belonged to someone else. Then he and Mary had to make a demanding journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem just to comply with an intrusive governmental order. And once they arrived in Bethlehem, there wasn't a suitable place to sleep, let alone give birth. No restaurants. No convenience stores. No 24-hour emergency room. No one would have blamed Joseph if, in the midst of it all, he would have blurted out, "Aw come on God! Not again! I am SO done with this year!"

But before we whine too much about *our* miserable 2020, and how awful things must have been for *Joseph*, consider Jesus, the Son of God. He didn't get off to much of a start either. He was born in a dark stable, not a clean hospital. He was attended by shepherds and animals, not doctors and nurses. He was dressed in shabby bands of cloth, not fancy baby clothes. And to top it all off, he was born to a family of little note, and would be raised in a town of little importance, in a land under the oppression of a ruthless imperial power.

But Bethlehem isn't a story of God *neglecting* Jesus. On the contrary, what happened in Bethlehem was a *story of love*. Bethlehem teaches us that Jesus will literally go *anywhere* and endure *anything* to demonstrate his love for us. He will always be especially present with us in the midst of our deepest suffering. Just as Jesus transformed a feeding trough into a royal throne that night, *tonight* he enters the brokenness of *our world* and *our hearts* with his transforming love. It doesn't mean that our hard times magically end. But in the midst of the suffering of a

time like now, the baby Jesus in Bethlehem reminds us that we aren't defined by our poverty of spirit, our poverty of income, our poverty of opportunity, or our poverty of hope. We are defined, refined, made holy, and blessed by his divine love, a love that will relentlessly reach out to us.

Friends, 2020 has been a rough year. But this Christmas Eve, in the middle of all our hardships, we're reminded that *for love*, Jesus sacrificed everything so that he could *be* with us, *bless* us, *forgive* us, *redeem* us, and *save* us. And tonight, we're reminded that by the grace of God, 2020 and everything that has made it so difficult and sometimes even downright rotten *will one day end*.

But what will *never* end is the love of Jesus, which sparkled that night in Old Bethlehem, and still shines upon us tonight, drawing heaven and earth together into a united chorus of praise. And so even this year, we, like the angels, can joyfully proclaim, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those who he favors!" Merry Christmas everyone! Amen.