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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Christmas Eve, December 24, 2020**  
**Nativity of Our Lord/Christmas Eve/Year B**  
**First Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7**  
**Second Reading: Titus 2:11-14**  
**Gospel Reading: Luke 2:1-20**  
**Sermon Title: “One Extraordinary Night”**

**Theme**

In winter’s deepest night, we welcome the light of the Christ child. Isaiah declares that the light of the long-promised king will illumine the world and bring endless peace and justice. Paul reminds us that the grace of God through Jesus Christ brings salvation to all people. The angels declare that Jesus’ birth is good and joyful news for everyone, including lowly shepherds. Filled with the light that shines in our lives, we go forth to share the light of Christ with the whole world.

**Text**

<sup>1</sup>In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” <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 heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

<sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

## Sermon

This is going to be "One Extraordinary Night!" I came up with that title months ago when we started planning *how* we might be able to safely host Christmas Eve services if we indeed hosted Christmas Eve services.

Months ago I wasn't sure we'd be here tonight. As you know by now through the brief announcements and by the service notes we handed out, we have taken extraordinary precautions to keep all of us as safe as we can be tonight. It goes without saying, the COVID-19 pandemic is bad and getting worse and my prayer for all of us is that we all stay well until we get the vaccine. "One Extraordinary Night" indeed.

Let's back up a few days. On December 21, three extraordinary events took place. One was that the (11-2) Pittsburgh Steelers lost to the (2-10-1) Cincinnati Bengals. That was not supposed to happen! Last Monday night was "One Extraordinary Night."

Another extraordinary event was the Winter Solstice, that once a year event when the North Pole has its maximum tilt away from the Sun thus giving us in the Northern Hemisphere the shortest day and the longest night. But then beginning the very next day, the nights, ever so slightly, begin to get just a little bit shorter and the days begin to get just a little bit longer. So December 21 was "One Extraordinary Night."

And this year, December 21 was extraordinary for another reason. On December 21 The two largest planets in the solar system, Jupiter and Saturn, did something that has not been seen since the Middle Ages: the two planets aligned so closely that they looked like a double planet that appeared like one extraordinarily big and bright star. How many of you saw it? No, we didn't did we? We experienced a combination of rain, sleet, and snow here in Ohio. This celestial event has been dubbed the "Christmas star." Could this be what the Wise Guys noticed and followed to Bethlehem? Absolutely ... NOT!

First of all, I should remind you that it is highly unlikely, a 1 in 365 chance, that Jesus was born on December 25, or December 21. So why do we celebrate the birth of our Lord on December 25? I'm so glad you asked.

I don't know!

People who research this kind of thing have several hypotheses, and *one* of them is that early Christians chose December 25 because that is when it *appeared* to them that the days began to get longer and they simply were off by four days. And since Jesus is the "great light" spoken of by Isaiah (Isaiah 9:2), and the light breaking into the darkness

according to Matthew (Matthew 6:23), and Jesus called himself the "Light of the world" (John 8:12) they thought it was a fitting day to celebrate their Lord's unknown birthday.

Was this extraordinary wonder of the cosmos that we witnessed on December 21 the Christmas Star or the Bethlehem Star? Not likely says Justin Mason, a director of Old Dominion University's Pretlow Planetarium. He told the *Virginian-Pilot* that that star may have been a rare celestial alignment of Jupiter, Venus, and a star known as Regulus all aligning around 2 B.C.

Well, how could the Star of Bethlehem have been seen BC (Before Christ)? Again, I am so glad you asked. The majority of New Testament scholars place Jesus' birth at 4 B.C. or before. So it is possible that the star that guided the Wise Guys to the baby Jesus was indeed this rare celestial alignment, of Jupiter, Venus, and the star known as Regulus.

What're the chances of that happening just when God needed to guide the Wise Guys? Allow me to quote the birthday boy himself, "for God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). Do any of you think for a moment that the creator of the universe didn't have that planned when God placed the stars and planets in the heavens?

This is something to bear in mind in a year when we are:

- living through the deadliest pandemic of our lives,
- record wildfires out west,
- a record number of hurricanes in the southeast,
- record heat,
- race riots,
- black lives matter,
- blue lives matter,
- all lives matter,
- defund the police
- Portland's Autonomous Zone
- Did I miss anything?

So we have established that this has been one extraordinary year for the human population of the world. We have noticed an extraordinary phenomenon in the sky. We have learned of one explanation for why we are gathered here *this* evening. And we have identified a plausible explanation for the extraordinary Bethlehem Star that guided the Wise Guys.

Maybe you have heard of Lee Strobel, the former investigative journalist for the Chicago Tribune. Many years ago, his wife became an evangelical Christian and that bugged him because he thought Christianity was just for the desperate and the weak-minded. So he set out to expose Christianity for the fraud he just knew it was. In his research, digging into documents of antiquity, and reading other first-hand eye-witness accounts of the First Century, excluding the witnesses in the Bible, he came to a startling and disturbing conclusion. And that conclusion was that that "One Extraordinary Night" in Bethlehem was ... true! And not just that "One Extraordinary Night" but the whole extraordinary story of Jesus Christ was true.

Now I am reasonably certain that for most of us this is not new news, but for Lee Strobel the result of his research was cathartic. He had set out to expose the Christian story as one extraordinary fable that had become a wedge issue between his wife and himself, and what his own research proved, cut him to the heart. He became a Christian, and wrote of his experience in the bestseller, "The Case for Christ." I recommend it if you haven't read it.

Though there are people who come to church on Christmas Eve just because it's tradition, or because Mom or Grandma makes them, most of us gathered here during a pandemic and terrible weather come because we believe this old, old story in faith, and we want to celebrate it.

For me, being a Christian is all I know how to be. Every relative I have ever known was or is a Christian. I don't know for sure but this is probably my 61<sup>st</sup> Christmas Eve service, and I can say that with confidence because my parents would never have considered *not* worshiping God revealed in Jesus Christ on this "One Extraordinary Night" – not because of the night, meaning December 24<sup>th</sup>, but because we are celebrating that God saw the pathetic human condition of his beloved creation and took the extraordinary action of sending his own flesh and blood in the form of the baby Jesus born to the Virgin Mary and her fiancé Joseph in the Bethlehem barn. And that baby Jesus grew up to be the rabbi Jesus who tried to teach the truth about his Heavenly Father and demonstrate godly living. When that didn't work, he allowed himself to be sent to the cross to save the world from its sins, including yours and mine. Oh, how he loves you and me.

It is my high honor to be the one to proclaim this extraordinary true story to all of you on this, "One Extraordinary Night". Whether it is the first time you've heard it or the millionth time, it is the true story of love come down, that Christians believe in faith, and it all happened on "One Extraordinary Night". Merry Christmas everyone!