Before the world was, love was. Love created the world and when it looked like humanity would ruin it, love became human to live within it. Love is named Jesus, born for us thousands of years ago, and reborn in our hearts each year as we gather to worship him. Tonight, we stop in the wonder of this miracle – the birth of the one who is fully human and fully divine – with all the power of the universe to save us from ourselves.

Mary and Joseph came to be in Bethlehem because Caesar had ordered all citizens to return to the places in which they had ancestors so they could register with the local authorities, representatives of the emperor. Though Joseph lived in Nazareth, he had roots in Bethlehem, so that is where Mary and Joseph had to go. It was not a good time for them to travel. Mary was nine months pregnant, her water threatening to break at any time. There she was, trying to balance herself on a donkey's back, making the 100 mile journey to Bethlehem just to fill out some government forms. Tired and exhausted, they finally reached the town. The young parents-to-be hoped there would be a place for them to stay, but all the rooms were filled with other citizens who had traveled there for the census.

In Pieter Bruegel's painting *The Numbering at Bethlehem*, painted in 1566, one has to search hard to find Mary and Joseph among all the people crowding into town. This sea of people is pouring into a building – maybe the census office? - a building too small to contain them all. No wonder the couple could not find a place to sleep that night. Maybe they were glad for a stable in which to lay their weary heads, though it could hardly have been the place they would have chosen for Mary to give birth. But it was where God chose for Jesus to be born – in a stable with a manger cushioned with straw. God chose two nobodies to bring Jesus into the world in the most humble of ways. He was to be a king like no other, not born of royalty in a gilded palace, but born in a stable, with just his parents and the animals to witness his birth. Jesus was not to stay a baby forever. He came into this world to rule with truth and grace, to threaten rulers like Caesar. Mighty powers on earth were no match for this Son of God, in whom was all the power in heaven and earth. In him was the love that was before all else. In him, all the love of God would dwell and grow forever.

Martin Luther, in his sermon on the Nativity, said: “Here is the child in whom is salvation. To me there is no great consolation given...than this, that Christ became man, a child, a babe, laying in the lap and at the breasts of his most gracious mother. Who is there whom this sight would not comfort? Now is overcome the power of sin, death, hell, conscience, and guilt, if you come to this gurgling babe and believe that he is come, not to judge you, but to save.” Just as Jesus is born in a little corner, a hidden away, dark corner of this world, passed over by thousands of people, so Jesus is continually born in those many dark, hidden, places of our heart, those places that even we don't want to acknowledge, those places where we don't want to look. If you remember nothing else this night, remember this: Jesus has come, not to judge us, but to save us. He comes to save the lowly, those like his own mother, Mary – those who are oppressed, refugees, single parents, widows, parents of condemned criminals, Third World women. As the familiar lyrics sing, “He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness, and wonders of his love.”

Truth, grace, glories, righteousness, wonders, love. Where in the world do we need such a savior this night? What is happening in your life to make you need him? He is here tonight, in that lowly manger, full of all the salvation the world will ever need. He has come to challenge the powers that threaten us, to focus us on the ones who need his help the most. He is the Prince of Peace, come to challenge our love of war and power. He has even come to those who cannot believe he is real, for it is sometimes so hard to see and hear him in all the chaos of this world. He will call from among us prophets, disciples, tellers of truth, doers of grace, advocates for those this world would rather throw away. We are now angels who proclaim the message to those who have lost all hope: “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you 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.” We have become reflections of the light that shines for all people, the light that shines in the darkness, that darkness cannot overcome.

Before the world was, love was. When it looked like humanity would ruin this world, love became human and dwells among us. Love is named Jesus, born for you, born for all this night. Come and adore him, come and sing praises to him. Feel him being born in your heart tonight, not to judge you but to save you.

And to save the world.

Amen.

*Christmas Eve 2016*

*December 24, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 2:1-20*