

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Philosophers ask, “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” More generally: “Does something exist if it is not perceived? Or does something happen if it is not observed?” If you think you know the answer to the question, you may find it interesting that philosophers give no definitive answer. Rather, many answer: there is no sound unless it is heard. To say more, they say, would be conjecture.

Many people think of God in this way: as mere conjecture at best, but at worst, something made up in the minds of men having no basis in reality, for gods are not something perceived or observed. Tonight, for the sake of argument, let me concede their point, but then respond “Thanks be to God that we are Christians, for we are followers of the true God, who breaks into creation, who is perceived and observed as its Savior. This is the God we proclaim.”

For that’s what we have before us tonight. The Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, descended from His throne on high to be conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin maid and passed through that birth canal to be born of His mother Mary. That’s what we confess, and that is what we observe ...

First, we observe that this miraculous birth happened just as it had been prophesied by God through the centuries. In the primordial garden God promised that the offspring that would bruise the serpent’s head would be the offspring of the woman alone. Isaiah told us that this child would be born of a virgin. And many years later, it would come to pass. The angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was that highly favored lady, chosen to bear the Savior of the world, who would undo the ancient curse.

The offspring to bless the nations would come from the loins of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah. David would be His father. He would be a king, taking up David’s throne — the government would “*be upon his shoulder.*” He would rule with justice and righteousness over David’s kingdom forever. This one, born a child and yet a king, would lighten the path of those in darkness and ignite hope in those sitting in the shadow of death.

Bethlehem, the city of David of the tribe of Judah, would be the birthplace of this ruler in Israel from whom the scepter would not depart. Yet He would not rule with a burdensome yoke or the rod of an oppressor; He will be a shepherd, leading His flock to quiet waters and making them lie down in pastures green. These prophecies, of course, all converge on the little Babe of Bethlehem.

Second, we observe that Luke brings geography and history to bear on the coming of gentle Mary’s child. He establishes not only that Jesus was born in

Bethlehem, but that the holy family had to make the arduous journey from Nazareth in Galilee to royal David's city. And these are real places, that you can visit today, unlike fictional places like Atlantis or Wakanda in mythic tales.

Luke also places the story at a certain time in history with real people. It didn't happen "once upon a time," as a fairy tale would, but in a specific moment in history when Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken and Herod the Great was ruling Judea.

Third, we observe that there were eyes there to witness the coming of this Divine Christ Child. To be sure, the circumstances were not ideal, for when the holy family arrived at Bethlehem, there was not room for them in civilized and sanitary quarters. They were relegated to the cattle stalls, so that perhaps only oxen and sheep, other than Joseph and Mary, witnessed Jesus' birth at first. But shepherds would soon hasten down from the hills where they were tending their sheep, so that they could see the newly born Savior of the world that had been announced to them.

Not only did they see, but they would have heard. It's a pious thought, but I don't think the lullaby we sang moments ago has it right. Surely the little Lord Jesus did cry, as all children do, when he got hungry or needed changing. This is how babies communicate their needs, and Jesus, fully a human baby, had those needs too. Thus, even though Luke doesn't record it, surely the shepherds heard the baby Jesus' cries, and they would go forth to report what they had seen and heard: the reality of God come down from heaven above to earth.

For this all bears witness to reality; this is not mere conjecture over a philosopher's puzzle; it is not a pious fiction. These are the facts. Yet facts need to be interpreted to bring understanding to them. "*What does this mean?*" Lutherans are always asking, and the angel and the multitudes with him supply us the answer.

The Christmas angel appeared to the shepherds. We should note the plural — this is not the testimony of a single shepherd, but a report established on the testimony of two or more witnesses as Moses prescribes. The angel appeared, shining with the glory of the Lord gaining the shepherd's rapt attention. And he proclaimed the joyous good news of what had happened — for it was much more than the simple birth of a baby to a Jewish mother. This baby was born to them, for their benefit, for the benefit of all people. This baby was born for you as Savior of the world — and we know how He will save: with scourges and nail and blood and death; this baby was God breaking into the world in our mortal flesh, both Christ our King and Lord of Lords, born that He might die enduring the punishment for our sins. That's the good news we celebrate this holy night.

Dear friends, the philosophers will debate their puzzles. We know the reality; we have the facts on our side: the prophecy, the geography, the history, the eyewitnesses. We've got the reality, but more importantly, we understand its significance; we know what it means. In this little babe, the head of the serpent, our enemy, is crushed; in this babe sin, our enemy, is atoned for; in this babe death, our enemy, is defeated. In this babe God has looked upon us with favor and given us peace.

What do you say to that? Christians respond with all sorts of words: "Amen!" "Hallelujah!" "Praise God!" But tonight, we may as well join with the angels, singing, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace.*" Indeed, we sang it already tonight — come back and sing it again tomorrow at the Feast. There's more yet to proclaim at the birth of our Savior, Christ the Lord, born for you.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.