

The Nativity of Our Lord: “Mesmerizing!”

Luke 2:1-20

December 24-25, 2019

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Mesmerizing moments last. They are laser-etched in our memories, sometimes like a freeze-frame photo and other times like a video feed. During the recent sabbatical with which our faith family blessed me, Pastor Mark & I spent time on the stunning Scottish island of Mull. It’s one of the Inner Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland, so it’s not terribly far-flung as islands go, but it’s largely unpopulated and incredibly picturesque. We launched our time there with a full-day guided tour of the island. Mull is vast, and the weather in Scotland is cold and rainy in December, so this was a driving tour. Our driver was a Lithuanian transplant to Scotland, a lovely man named Linus. As we plotted our itinerary at the beginning of the day, Linus showed us the map of Mull and assured us the views from the cliffs overlooking the ocean would be – **mesmerizing**. I thought they’d be lovely, but I wondered if “mesmerizing” was a little over the top. It wasn’t. So come back on January 26 for the travelogue I’ll give after our annual meeting, including photos of the landscapes and seascapes that did indeed “mesmerize” us 😊. I think an artist would describe the quality of light sifting through the clouds and spilling onto the ocean that day as “evanescent.”

What are the moments that have “mesmerized” you since last Christmas? The moments, minutes, days you’ll hold closest to your heart as we enter the year of our Lord 2020 and look back on this year of our Lord 2019? Before I went to Europe I had some guesses and hopes about what I’d see. But we really never know just what we’ll experience or feel in hoped-for moments, right?

The birds' eye view of Calgary Bay and Beach on the Island of Mull was wonderful, but even better was the treat of watching an otter at close quarters, seeing him swim up to the shore ledge, settle himself on a rock, roll over on his back, groom himself and act as if he were sunning himself except there was no sun! Second place for mesmerizing sight on our trip was a brilliant rainbow on the far shore of Loch Lomond, right across the lake from where we sat at lunch. If we'd had a motorboat I'm sure we would've found the pot of gold on the opposite shore.

Next up in mesmerizing moments was the sight of an entire flock of sheep looking into the living room and bedroom windows of the Air b 'n b we rented on Mull. Mark pointed out that I had a chance to preach to the literal flock before we even returned to Manasquan! The only shepherds we saw in Scotland were driving what looked like a golf cart they used to herd both sheep and sheepdogs down the road in front of our car. "Toto, we're not in New Jersey anymore!" The fact that the sheep's haunches were spray-painted various colors certainly sets them apart from the flocks we see covering the hills on Christmas cards.

Angels, talking to and serenading **shepherds**, are front and center in the story of our Lord's birth as St. Luke tells it. Speak about mesmerizing moments.... We've gotta believe that angelic encounter was **a most mystical event** in the lives of those shepherds, along with their midnight visit to the young mother of a newborn Child laid in the hay of the animals' feedbox.

The angels had told the shepherds:

"...to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2:11)

The shepherds hadn't gone AWOL from their shepherding duties to relieve boredom or to satisfy curiosity. They sought out the Child because He was born not just to Mary but **to them. They had a stake in the life of this Little Stranger. He was born for their sakes.** Shepherds lived out-of-doors so much of the time they couldn't keep the Jewish cleanliness laws and were considered less-than by more observant Jews with more sedentary occupations. But surely even they knew of God's thousand-year-old promise to send a Messiah, a descendant of King David, royalty who had started out as a shepherd boy himself. These shepherds and the rest of the Jewish people expected the Messiah to save them from their **human** oppressors. They had no reason to believe that this Messiah would save them not from Caesar but from the devil, and redeem them not from Rome but from their sins, offering forgiveness for their failures in love toward God and neighbor. This Messiah would be not their earthly monarch but their heavenly Lord, God's own Son.

At the beginning of our trip Pastor Mark, Kristiane and I saw the da Vinci exhibit at the Louvre. One of the paintings is called Salvator Mundi, Savior of the World. Maybe you've heard about it. What is now widely considered the original, painted by da Vinci himself, fetched more money two years ago than any painting in history. When it was auctioned off at Christie's in New York, this one painting went for \$450.3 million. The sale was made anonymously, but rumor has it that the buyer may be none other than the now-infamous Saudi crown prince bin Salman. Supposedly the painting was to become part of the collection of the Louvre's satellite museum in Abu Dhabi, but it never arrived and is currently AWOL. Some say it is now at home on bin Salman's yacht. If that's true, I wonder if the eyes of this portrait of our Lord follow the crown prince wherever he goes....

Since the original's whereabouts are unknown, we saw a copy, attributed to one of da Vinci's disciples. The Lord is wearing a red robe, holding up His right hand in blessing and holding the orb of the world in His left hand. His facial expression is arresting, riveting, soul-searing. Salvator Mundi: The Savior of the World. [Pointing to crucifix:] Salvator Mundi: The Savior of the World. [Pointing to Christ Child in manger:] Salvator Mundi: The Savior of the World. [Pointing to altar:] Salvator Mundi: The Savior of the World.

Da Vinci portrayed our Savior as grown Man, King, holding the orb of the world He came to save, and also as precious Babe. I looked for but didn't find Christmas cards of a couple da Vinci paintings of Mother & Child. When you Google Salvator Mundi to see what it looks like, search for the Benois Madonna, too. It's a delightful painting usually at home at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Smiling Mary looks like a child herself as she holds a cherub-like Baby Jesus in her lap, little white flowers nearly crushed in His chubby little hands. The exhibit guide offers this description:

The cross-shaped flower Mary is handing to Jesus prefigures the Passion of Christ. The Child solemnly takes it while his mother smiles in encouragement, joyful in the knowledge that her son's death will procure salvation for humankind.¹

The mesmerizing moment. She held Him. He holds us. We kneel before the cross. We kneel before the creche. We kneel before the altar. He is the Salvator Mundi. **To us** is born a Savior. **To you** is born a Savior. He is Christ the Lord. Mesmerizing.... Amen

¹*Leonard de Vinci: 1452-1519* (Paris: Musee du Louvre, 2019), #39.

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