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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/24/2014, Christmas Eve  
Luke 2:1-20  
The Prince Who Became a Pauper

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you should like a title for this evening's sermon, I call it "The Prince Who Became a Pauper" — a poor person. I am charmed, you see, by a certain simple passage in our Gospel Lesson, especially when I try to reckon with what really happened, with the holy incarnation of God. The passage goes this way:

<sup>6</sup>And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. <sup>7</sup>And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger... (Luke 2:6-7, KJV)

Wondrous thought! For this birth is not just another birth, but it is more like a prince freely and forever becoming a pauper, starting off life lying in a feeding trough for the animals:

(not) like a king for a change donning a beggar's rags and mingling with the crowd, but by belonging to them in every way... (Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 58f)

This birth is that royal and divine condescension whereby the prince of heaven becomes the pauper of earth, that you and I might become the very children of God. And so it is that St. Paul sings about the holy incarnation of our God:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9, RSV)

How humbly on earth occurs this birth that causes such rejoicing in heaven that the joy splashes down into the nighttime sky and the angels find themselves singing to the shepherds:

<sup>14</sup>Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (Luke 2:14, KJV)

"Good will" indeed toward humanity, toward every man and woman, boy and girl on this old earth and toward each of you, my friends, sitting here in the pews of Immanuel Lutheran Church on this Christmas Eve. Good will toward us all, for

the only begotten Son of God has been born as one of us — the Prince of heaven born as a pauper on earth, that you and I might have hope that outstretches every barrier, every disappointment, every guilt, and every setback that life can throw at us. The prince becomes poor that you and I might become rich through him.

## **THE PRINCE AND THE PAUPER**

Some of you recognize, I am quite sure, the reference to Mark Twain's novel in my sermon title. Let me read for you the first few lines of Mark Twain's book *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882). They speak of the contrast between two births:

IN THE ancient city of London, on a certain autumn day in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, a boy was born to a poor family of the name of Canty, who did not want him. On the same day another English child was born to a rich family of the name of Tudor, who did want him. All England wanted him, too. England had so longed for him, and hoped for him, and prayed God for him, that, now that he was really come, the people went nearly mad for joy. Mere acquaintances hugged and kissed each other and cried... There was no talk in all England but of the new baby, Edward Tudor, Prince of Wales, who lay lapped in silks and satins... But there was no talk about the other baby, Tom Canty, lapped in his poor rags, except among the family of paupers whom he had just come to trouble with his presence.<sup>1</sup>

The drama of the story is that these two children become interchanged, and no one can tell the difference because they look so alike. It is as if they are identical twins, and when the pauper boy is invited into the palace by the prince, and they exchange their clothes for fun, no one can recognize the prince when he steps out of the palace. The moment the prince steps beyond the palace gates in the rags of the pauper, he is lost. Without his royal robes, arrayed in the rags of the poor, no one will credit him with being king. In fact, they buffet him and despise him for what they think are his pretensions.

The prince has his adventures, and hard ones they are. Meanwhile, the pauper is now so pampered and treated as the prince by everyone in sight that soon he begins to feel that he is the prince.

In the end, the prince regains his throne, and the pauper is elevated to be the king's ward. Each boy is changed by his brief time in the other's shoe. And for England's sake, it is good that the prince had become a pauper for a while. It left him with much more sympathy toward the poor and the unjustly accused, and he

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<sup>1</sup> Twain, Mark (2012-05-04). *The Prince and the Pauper* (Dover Thrift Editions) (p. 1). Dover Publications. Kindle Edition.

became a reformer of England's harsh laws. And so, the final page of the book contains this nice passage:

More than once, when some great dignitary, some gilded vassal of the crown, made argument against his [the King's] leniency, and urged that some law which he was bent upon amending was gentle enough for its purpose, and wrought no suffering or oppression which any one need mightily mind, the young king turned the mournful eloquence of his great compassionate eyes upon him and answered—

“What dost thou know of suffering and oppression? I and my people know, but not thou.”<sup>2</sup>

Well, the Christmas Gospel is that the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, know! They know whereof they speak when they talk of this world's suffering and oppression, for the Prince of heaven became a pauper in this world and knew something to his dying breath of what suffering and oppression mean.

## **BUT THIS PAUPER IS ALSO KING**

Now, let me tell you the great thing about this Prince who became a Pauper. The great thing is that this Pauper is also King — indeed, King of all creation. For it would do us little good to have a God who knows by personal experience the sorrows and troubles that come the way of our human race *if he could not help us*. But the Christ Child can help us!

My friends, let me reveal something to you from a pastor's point of view — something I bet every pastor is mindful of come Christmas Eve: In a congregation this large, and as happy as the Christmas liturgy is, still there might well be people sitting in our pews this evening who are struggling. It might be so for you. This might be a tough time in life for you, perhaps because of illness or grief or poverty or terrible temptation. You might have gotten yourself into a fix you can hardly see the solution of. The tornadoes of troubles that can beset a human being do not simply lift and fly away because it is Christmas Eve.

Furthermore, things might be good for you now. I hope they are. I hope you are enjoying a strong season of spiritual refreshment. But if so, try to tuck this idea away in the back of your memory in case you need it someday: This Christ Child can help you. This Prince who became a Pauper is also our Savior, with all the kingly strength and goodness and resources he needs to take care of you.

The Bible delights in the capacity of our God to understand by *personal experience* what it means to be a human being. Let me lift up one text along these lines:

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<sup>2</sup> Twain, Mark (2012-05-04). *The Prince and the Pauper* (Dover Thrift Editions). Dover Publications. Kindle Edition. Location 2982.

For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15, RSV)

This is like Mark Twain's line when the king speaks to the dandy who defends England's harsh laws:

“What dost thou know of suffering and oppression? I and my people know, but not thou.”

Jesus knows about suffering and oppression. He knows by hard personal experience. And so his heart reaches out to you now and will reach out to you in the future when you are in need. But he is not left merely to sympathize. He also has the ability and the heart to make all things work together for your good. So put your trust in him.

And know this too: This Christ Child, this Prince who became a Pauper, knows how to help you in the matter of day-to-day life. Learn of him and take his yoke upon you:

<sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.  
(Matthew 11:29, RSV)

Resolve this coming year to draw closer to this Christ Child who came all the way from heaven to earth to draw closer to you. Yield and surrender yourself to this Babe born in a manger, for he comes to improve our lives, to make them even more full and more abundant, and to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.