

### 1.1.2017 The Circumcision of Christ (Philippians 2:9; Luke 2:15)

Donald Stratton volunteered for the Navy in 1940. He was assigned to the USS Arizona, the flagship of the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. The Arizona was scheduled to return to the West Coast in November 1941 for maintenance, but during a training maneuver it was struck by the Oklahoma and stayed in Hawaii for repairs. That's why the ship was anchored at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Of the 2,403 fatalities on that “date that will live in infamy,” almost half (1,177) were on the Arizona and 1,102 people are still entombed aboard the sunken ship. Donald Stratton survived, but suffered burns over 65 percent of his body. He endured months of hospitalization and therapy and his weight dropped from 170 pounds to just 92 pounds.

After a medical discharge, he spent a year at home. Then, incredibly, he reenlisted in the Navy. He was stationed on another ship in the South Pacific where he served through the end of the war. In his autobiography he writes that every American is in the debt of the gallant men and women who died in our nation's wars so that we can live. To emphasize this fact he quotes this poem:

*Dear Lord,  
Lest I continue  
My complacent way,  
Help me to remember that somewhere,  
Somehow out there  
A man died for me today.  
As long as there be war,  
I must answer  
Am I worth dying for?*

*Am I worth dying for?* It's a powerful question that demands a response, but be careful who you ask for there are forces at work in this world that would have you believe in many cases the answer is “No”. You see, we live in a society filled with the loud voices of those who speak lies – people who say to the unborn or the terminally ill that you aren't worth dying for. In fact, in

this country we have physicians that specialize in ensuring that each year almost 1,000,000 of the tiniest, most vulnerable future citizens of this great nation never take a breath and other doctors who are able to prescribe medication to the terminally ill that ensures they breathe their last breath. As we consider the implications of the ugly truth we don't have to wonder why so many people are depressed. We may think we can, but we cannot insulate ourselves from the way this disregard for the dignity of human life permeates our culture like a type of cancer. The message that our society, many of our friends and neighbors, and our government supports and proclaims is simple and clear: Your worth is based on what you do. If you're young and helpless or ill and hopeless "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are no longer rights endowed to you by your Creator, but only words written on an outdated historic document.

*Am I worth dying for?* I would suggest that for anyone who lives long enough, even for a war hero like Donald Stratton who fought and suffered to protect our freedom, the question could one day be answered by society with a resounding "No!" It's a heartbreaking thought and the pain we feel as we consider not only the likelihood of that happening, but witness this happening to others like him is evidence that something is terribly wrong. If any of us live to the point where we've grown too old *to do* anything, too weak to even care for our own needs, will the frantic pace of our society (what I would suggest is the complacent way of our culture) slow down long enough to speak softly and quietly to any of us about the infinite value of every human life?

*Am I worth dying for?* In the baby born in Bethlehem, a baby born to die, we have the Answer. The days of Christmas are here that we may be awakened from our complacent way. The light and life of Jesus Christ, "*the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world*" (John 1:9) is here – offering true perspective on the fundamental basis for the infinite value of every human life. It is only by His light that we can see clearly that our worth is not grounded in anything we do, but in who we are in Him. As the Gospel declares: "*But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God*" (John 1:12). This is the Good News – the good tidings of

great joy that the angel declared to the “*shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night*” and those things that Mary kept and “*pondered them in her heart.*”

Most of us have heard the words of our Gospel reading this morning so many times that we fail to recognize the significance of the birth of the Son of God being announced by an angel of the Lord to shepherds. We arrange the figures in our nativity scenes and talk about the Magi and the shepherds as though they were a group gathered together to honor the newborn King, but the Magi (those highly-honored wise men from the east) were only given a star to lead them and they arrived a year or perhaps two years after that miraculous night in Bethlehem. The humble and lowly shepherds, however, were given the message by an angel of the Lord on that very night “*and they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger*” (Luke 2:16).

The angel sent by God didn't proclaim the Good News to kings, priests, or noblemen, but to lowly shepherds. You wouldn't find these men living in beautiful homes – they were sleeping on the dirty ground out in the hills with their sheep. These shepherds didn't wear the finest clothing – they wore layers of their own bedding to protect them from the elements. They were grimy, rough, unshaven, and probably smelled as bad as the herd of animals they cared for. They were the unclean outcasts of society. From the moment of His birth, even before His birth, from the moment of His Incarnation when “*the Word was made flesh*” (John 1:14) in Mary's womb, Jesus humbled Himself and reached out to the rejects (those who society would never die for) to demonstrate the fact that there are no limits to His love, nobody is beyond His reach, and regardless of what society says about your worth His Word proclaims your infinite value – as sons and daughters of God! We must recognize that Almighty God sent His message in a powerful and significant way to these shepherds – the humblest of people. While His message is clearly spoken to the world, may we by His grace (like shepherds) be humble enough to hear it.

*Am I worth dying for?* This question that demands a response can only be answered objectively by our Creator. In the good tidings of great joy

proclaimed to all people in this season of Christmas we have our answer. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the King of Kings, came as the humblest, to the humblest and in doing so demonstrated His eternal love for you is not grounded in what you do, but in who you are in Him. So, on second thought there's no need to ask *Am I worth dying for?* Only look to the Cross for there will you find the question has already been answered.

*“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men”*