

Christmas Eve, Year C
December 24, 2021
New Song Church
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Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14

Good News for All the People

Reading Jesus' birth narrative according to Luke again this year, I am struck by how very ordinary his story is given the time in which it took place. You have your two main characters – Joseph and a very pregnant Mary. Supporting actors are donkeys, and other assorted farm animals and beasts of burden. The setting is a stable in Bethlehem where Mary and Joseph have recently arrived, having been compelled to travel to Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home, to be counted in a census ordered by the Emperor. You would have thought that at least Mary could have been granted an exemption from the arduous journey from Nazareth because of her advanced pregnancy, but the Emperor's order did not include or care about such details. Luke tells us that, "While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

Now, we all know a great deal more about how this simple story plays out, but pause with me just for a moment to consider what Luke does not tell his reader about the birth of Jesus in the opening lines of his second chapter. For instance – there is no mention of God – don't you think that's a bit odd? And, the name of the child isn't given – he's simply "firstborn son." But perhaps most incredible of all is that there is no hint of what difference, if any, this humble birth will have on the course of human history – not even an inkling! Perhaps we think it

remarkable that the birth took place in a stable, but that is likely because we are 21st century people who think of sterile hospitals as the norm for a place to birth babies. I doubt Mary and Joseph's circumstance was all that unusual 2,000 years ago, especially in a small town bursting at the seams with people who had come to be counted in the census.

Meanwhile, out in the countryside, a few shepherds are having their own perfectly ordinary night in the fields with their sheep when an angel shows up in this story, which now becomes their story. At this point we, as the readers, realize that this is no ordinary birth and no ordinary child.

"Do not be afraid;" the angel tells this group of awestruck shepherds out in the middle of nowhere watching their sheep, "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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." I can only imagine this scene. Shepherds on their knees in the presence of what must surely be holy, mouths agape, hearts racing, minds confused. And then, as if to add an exclamation mark to the first angel's already astounding message, a whole host of angels appear glorifying and praising God. Imagine what joy, surprise, and wonder must have filled the shepherds' hearts in that moment!

"Joy?" you may ask? How could they be joyful? They were shaking in their sandals! As well they should be! And that's reasonable to think, because in the English translation, we hear the angel's words, "Do not be afraid," and assume that the shepherds were terrified. But New Testament Greek scholar, Ginger Barfield, explains that the word translated as "fear" could also be translated as "reverence" or "respect." She says, "The angel's response does not have to be read as: 'Stop being

afraid.’ It may very well have the sense of ‘Stop reverencing me and listen to this message—it is not about me; something far greater has happened.’”ⁱ After all, angels are first and foremost messengers. Though their appearance, particularly if their appearance is as dramatic as this one to the shepherds, would surely get our attention, what is important is not the angels themselves but the message they bear from God.

In Luke, the child still has no name at this point, but God is most definitely now part of the story and we catch a glimpse of what this birth might mean, not only for the shepherds – the first chosen recipients of the news, but as the angel says “for all the people,” including us.

And what is that news? That God is breaking into the world in a new and wonderful way to tell us, to make sure that we know beyond a shadow of a doubt, that we are loved – deeply, truly, and forever. For God to make that point completely clear, the message was shared first with shepherds – among the lowliest in the social order of that time. God wanted there to be no doubt that “good news of great joy for all the people,” means ALL people – no asterisks and no exceptions. God comes most especially to be with and for those who the world treats as “less than.” In our day, the angels might have appeared to a group of people struggling with mental illness, or sex workers, or criminals, or any number of people who feel that they don’t fit the world’s understanding of loveable, of worthy, or important. The angel’s message of good news is that God comes also to those of us who feel alone, who are grieving, who are suffering from physical or psychological trauma, AND God comes to those of us who are comfortable and content with our lot in life – because remember, Good News for all people means ALL people.

Some say that in the incarnation – in God choosing to be like us and to share our humanity – that God turned the world upside down – upsetting the traditional

balance of power by humbling the mighty and lifting up the lowly. But what if instead of turning the world upside down, what God has really done for us in Jesus is to turn the world right-side-up, working to restore God's dream for humanity and for all of creation?

As we gather this night in the glow of fond memories of candlelight, singing familiar carols and celebrating Jesus's birth in the warmth and joy of one another's presence, may we not be lulled into complacency, but be challenged by the vision of a world turned right-side-up by a baby in a manger. Our new bishop, Betsey Monnot says, and I quote, "I believe that we are all pregnant with God, who waits longingly to be born in us." How might the incarnate Christ be born in us today and in the coming year? How might we join in making God's dream of a world turned right-side-up a reality?

To close, I invite you to turn to pages 10 & 11 and to sing the final verse of O Little Town of Bethlehem together once more:

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;

cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels, their great glad tidings tell;

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Ginger Barfield in Working Preacher in her commentary on Luke 2:1-20, 2016.

ⁱⁱ O Little Town of Bethlehem, v. 5.