



Christmas Eve at Home
Luke 2:1-14

Rev. Thomas G. James
Washington Street UMC
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TRADITION

Again, Merry Christmas. I'm grateful to be able to join you on this Christmas Eve afternoon from my home. As like many of you, this is not normal for me. Christmas Eve is usually one of the busiest of days in my life – it is one of the most cherished days in the life of the church, and, well, there are a lot of pastoral expectations that come with such commotion. My normal Christmas Eve afternoon is usually filled with me running from home to church and back, cooking and dining with friends before (or after) sharing with you all in our Christmas Eve service. There's hardly time to catch one's breath in this final stretch toward Christmas morning, perhaps save for the momentary pause as Silent Night ends and we join in wonder at the sight of the lit candles.

There's an expected normalcy at Christmas, even if that normalcy is rushed and harried.

I appreciate John and Kathi mentioning the traditions of their family around Christmas. As we have named a few times in recent weeks, there's something comforting about the traditions that define the holiday season. Whether it's the baking, the singing, the card making, or the visiting of family – Christmas traditions are a marker of the time. While some of these traditions are still possible this year, it's pretty obvious that, with travel and large family gatherings being limited, some of these traditions will go un-fulfilled. Even our tradition of gathering together tonight – in person – has been altered.

While there is a great deal that is comforting about the routine of Christmas, about our normal and traditional expectations, it is oddly fitting for our routine to be shaken up at Christmas. The Christmas story in and of itself is about interruptions and welcoming the unexpected.

We've talked in recent weeks about the unexpected visitation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary. The announcement of Gabriel to Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph is anything but normal or anticipated. We find the same pattern of interruption in tonight's scripture, found in Luke 2.

First, there is the unexpected census. Mary and Joseph are not only expecting the unexpected in the birth of Jesus, but now, in Mary's third-trimester, they must make a journey to Bethlehem, Joseph's city of lineage, for a government registration. (They are certainly past the recommended travel period by Mary's OB.) I don't expect that was an enjoyable journey, even with a donkey to provide rider's assistance.

Second, upon arrival in Bethlehem, the guest house was no longer available. The Greek word we translate as *Inn* is not indicating some cheap motel. The word, *katalyma*, would have been referring to some form of public shelter, likely a guest house on the family property. When traveling to Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary would have been going back to Joseph's family's property, and there would have been some expectation on their part that the family would put them up – that was customary of the time. But there is no room in the guest house. Perhaps the rest of the family coming into town for the census beat Joseph and Mary back to Bethlehem, and, as we all do, they claimed first dibs on the King Bed in the guest house. So, in an unexpected and unwelcomed turn of events, Mary and Joseph are invited to stay in the basement – the room where the animals are brought in to stay warm at night.

Finally, the unexpected events effect more than just the holy family. In the fields nearby, the shepherds were watching the sheep at night. I know I've said it before, but it's always fun to repeat: sheep are dumb animals. They can't take care of themselves. In this first-century context, generally speaking, those who took jobs as shepherds were only a bit smarter than the sheep. These were bottom rung jobs, offered to those who couldn't find or hold other work. And yet, these shepherds enjoyed the anonymity of the job. There was something freeing for them about tending the sheep on the hillsides. They were unaffected by city life, or the masses of people in town. But to them, while they were watching the flock by night, not just an angel, but a whole host of angels appeared to them. They were caught off-guard, and they were fearful of this unexpected and unanticipated event. And to this group of rugged outcasts, the angels proclaimed, "Do not be afraid, for born *to you* this day is a Messiah, the Lord."

While there is comfort in the traditions, in the expected, in the routine of Christmas, the Christmas story is anything but sanitary. For a people who were hurting and broken – to us who are weary of the world – "God came to turn over the tables, to create a whole new system to resurrect and redeem us rather than merely rehabilitate us."ⁱ And as this new way emerges, breaking up the routine and common tradition, the angels proclaim, "Fear not, but glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

SENTAMENTALISM

Leave it to Joel Wood to offer such a profound and challenging invitation. "Let's not get too sentimental."

Much like our traditions, Christmas tends to bring out the deepest of emotions and feelings. Personally, I blame Hallmark, and maybe photoshop. We've been fed this feel-good story for so long, it's almost as if we have bought into the idea that the birth of Jesus was serene and calm. Like a Hallmark movie, there may be a disappointing dash to the airport along the way, but it's nothing a Christmas carol or a perfectly timed apology can't fix. In the end, we're left with a feel-good moment that makes us all sappy and warm inside.

I don't know about you, but as sentimental as this holiday tends to be – as much as I would love to join in offering a hug to Mrs. Doris – or any of you on this Christmas Eve – the power of the Christmas story is that it leaves little room for sentimentalism. Rev. David Lose asks and

answers the question, “Why do we like the photoshopped image of Christmas better than reality?” “I have a hunch,” he offers, “it’s because life is hard enough already.”ⁱⁱ

We’ve been saying for the past nine months that life cannot return to what it was. The enlightenment of the virus, and the many social issues that have risen to deafening visibility this year, invite us to not just hope for COVID to go away so that we might have a return to normalcy. We should not treat this Christmas as any other, for it is not like any other. We should not let the invitation of this year’s Christmas at home pass us by without hearing the invitation of God in the birth of Christ in a new and different way.

“Christmas is not merely an anniversary celebration of Jesus’ birth – that is, it is not just the marking of an event in history – but the active remembering of what God has already accomplished in Jesus Christ and the promise of the coming completion of God’s reign.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Christmas event, the birth of Christ, the incarnation of the divine, it’s not a feel good story. This is the most disrupting event in human history. I mean, our daily and yearly calendars are marked because of the birth of Christ. The effects of this single birth pervade almost every aspect of our lives – from the land we live in, to the quarterly reports of capitalism’s sales, to our weekly schedule, to every election ever!

We cannot underestimate, this is not just a feel good story – the celebration of Christ’s birth is not, at its core, sentimental. No, instead, it’s instrumental in the ongoing and continual shift of human history toward God’s will. And this invites us to consider a challenging invitation.

How does the proclamation of God in the birth of Christ disrupt our lives? If ... and I understand, it’s a big if ... but if we were to allow Christmas this year to be more than just a feel good moment, if we would allow our separation and reflection to call us to something different – something more – what would that look like?

SYMBOLISM

Like the traditions and the feelings, the symbols of Christmas have great meaning. Whether it’s the candy cane, the wreath, the candles, the Crismons, or the tree, there is meaning in the symbols of the season. The same is true for the story – there is meaning in the people, the places, and the symbols of the Christmas story. These symbols are part of the invitation to consider how Christ’s birth can be so disruptive in our lives.

Let’s reconsider the *Motel 6* – I mean, the guest room. “There was no room in the inn.”

The promise that had been made to the people of Israel since the days of the prophets centuries before the birth of Christ, was that a king was to come. There was to be a new child, whose name would be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, Everlasting Father. There was a hope by this broken, oppressed, and hurting people for one who to come and lead them in a victor’s campaign to regain freedom and independence. The expectation – or at least the hope – was that this Savior – this Messiah – would come from the royal line, donned in greatness.

And yet, this child, this Son of God, this incarnate being who was the King – who was the Mighty God in-fleshed, who was the Prince of Peace and Wonderful Counselor – this Messiah, not only would he not be presented in the halls of royalty, but even the guest house of his family property in Bethlehem would be unavailable for him. Those who came to announce his birth did not do so in the halls of a palace, but instead, in the fields, to the poor and the lowly.

The stable, or the basement room, is symbolic. This is not a King who will rule by power and might, but by grace and humility.

Those who were first invited to share in the birth are the shepherds. I've already told you where shepherds fell on the societal ladder. And yet, the shepherds are more than just guests at the baby shower, they are indicative of the promise of God in the birth of Christ. "The shepherds are invited to join in a cosmic chorus of men and angels glorifying God for what he has done."^{iv} The promise of God in Jesus Christ is first and foremost an invitation of welcome and good news to those who are among the most outcast by the societal norms. Professor Fred Craddock puts it this way, "The heavenly host sings of peace, that wholeness of life which God grants to persons and societies through a restoring of balance in all the forces in creation which influence our lives."^v The shepherds are a tangible symbol of the hope God offers in Christ.

And the shepherds aren't just there to witness the good news; the presence of this child, the power of the birth of Christ is immediately restorative and impactful. If we read just a bit further, verse 20 tell us that, after visiting Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

See, for all that *is* symbolic in this story, there is something more than symbolic in this birth. This birth is not just a hope and a prayer, it is an enacting of truth. The shepherds did not leave glorifying God because of something that might be one day – they left in praise because of what God was doing in the person of Jesus Christ. "[The shepherds] may return to their ordinary life and to business as usual; but even though their circumstances may not have changed, the world is not the same: a Savior has entered the human story."^{vi}

And this – this birth – it is not sentimental. It is not symbolic. It's not even a reassuring tradition.

The birth of Christ is disruptive to the devastating pain of human frailty. The gift of God in Christ flips all of the societal expectations upside down, and whether shepherds who come in lowliness, or Magi who come bringing valuable gifts, the incarnation invites us as one humanity to join in the noise making. For in Christ, God has won out. The promise of new life is declared, not just possible, but a realized truth.

And this, this reality – this promise – this present hope – this gifted augmentation of what could have been – it invites our participation. Like the shepherds, we are invited to gather and to witness the glory of God in the birth of Christ. For, in a very symbolic, traditional, and

sentimental way, the birth of Christ sets ablaze in each of us a new light. And that light in us, shared in community with one another, creates a new horizon – a new path – a new dawning for the glory of God to be seen, and known, and realized even in the world today. That, though born so many years ago, we can receive this gift once more, that God’s love might burn in us anew.

As we remember and recall the sharing and the spreading of the light, I invite you to join me in prayer:

Glory to you, O God, for good news of great joy that you give to all people. Thank you for Jesus Christ, the Messiah, who lived among us and now reigns on high. Thank you for his light that shines in the darkness. With the angels, we sing praise to you, celebrating your glory in all the earth, in the Son given to us, and in your promised salvation.

Gathered in virtual community on this Christmas Eve, we pray for your church in every place, that we may make known to others what has been told to us about this child. Help us to bear Christ’s light in every place of need. Draw near to those who spend this night apart from community: travelers and those far from home, those who live alone, one who can’t be in a hospital room with their loved one, one who sits in a prison cell, one who is working deep in the night, one estranged from family or friends.

Comfort those who are poor and vulnerable: the child at risk, the homeless on the streets, the family that is hungry, and those contending with prejudice and scorn.

Restore those who have lost faith, lost hope, or simply lost their way. End the hostilities and wars we construct by ushering in the endless peace of your design. Establish your reign of justice and righteousness. Shine in us once again the light that is your love, that we may abound together in brilliance until all might know your glory. You are the Lord of hosts who, with zeal, will do this; through Jesus Christ our Savior. **Amen.**

ⁱ David Lose. workingpreacher.org

ⁱⁱ Lose.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kimberly Bracken Long. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

^{iv} David Lyle Jeffrey. *Luke: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012.

^v Fred B. Craddock. *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.

^{vi} John T. Carroll. *Feasting on the Gospel: Luke, Volume 1*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.