

Rev. Lisa Schrott
December, 24 2022 8 pm service
Luke 2:1-20
From Generation to Generation: We Tell the Story

Luke 2:1-20 The Birth of Jesus

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 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 in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, 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." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Do innkeepers' wives have naturally curly hair? This is one of the great theological questions of our time, voiced by Frieda as she receives a nativity pageant script from Lucy in Charles' Schultz' *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. And when Frieda complains that the dust from her innkeeper husband PigPen is taking the curl out her naturally curly hair, Charlie Brown tells her "Don't think of it as dust. Think of it as maybe the soil of some great past civilization. Maybe the soil of ancient Babylon. It staggers the imagination. He (PigPen) may be carrying soil that was trod upon by Solomon. Or even Nebuchadnezzar."¹

Or Mary and Joseph as they make the trek from Nazareth to Jerusalem, a distance of about 80

¹ https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/movie_script.php?movie=a-charlie-brown-christmas

miles. We don't know how long the journey was, or whether or not there actually was a donkey, but scholars estimate the trek was about 4 days if they walked, and 7-10 days if they had a donkey. It turns out donkeys slow you down on the road – they have a mind of their own and when they are done for the day, they are done. But donkeys can carry provisions, and Mary and Joseph likely needed a way to carry food, some clothes, and just in case the baby arrived while they were away from home, the donkey could haul that heavy diaper bag, pack and play, and the car seat. They didn't need to bring a bouncy seat, because the donkey could serve that purpose as well.

While the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists were not around to tell Mary that travel in her last month of pregnancy is not recommended, I'm sure there were some interesting conversations about the wisdom of the trip. And some stories to tell after the fact. Actually THE STORY to tell. For this a story we tell year after year - and not just in the church - as those who have watched the *Peanuts Christmas* special through the ages know.

The story of Jesus' birth grabs our attention for it has all of the elements of a great story - characters that capture our imagination, an interesting locale, a twist in the plot when there is no room at the inn, the juxtaposition of angels - we imagine glowing in radiant splendor - and the more earthy shepherds showing up at the party. And the story of Jesus' birth grabs our attention because it is both full of the ordinary and the miraculous.

A few years ago, the Rev. Ashley-Ann Masters, a Presbyterian chaplain and author penned a blog post entitled "Some Lady Holding a Baby."² In this post, Masters recounts a visit to a grocery store check-out line a few days before Christmas. She says "I was standing in line when the customer in front of me asked the clerk if she had any Christmas stamps. The conversation went like so:

Customer: "Do you have Christmas stamps?"

Clerk: "No. We just have Liberty Bell and some lady holding a baby."

Customer: "Can I see them? That's Mary holding Jesus. I'll take those."

Clerk: "How did they get a picture of them?"

Customer looks back at me to hide laughing, so I chime in, "I bet it's someone's interpretation of what they may have looked like."

Clerk: "Maybe. 'Cause I don't think anyone took pictures back then."

The customer went on about her purchase and the customer behind me and I pretended to look at magazines in attempt to snuff our laughter. As the clerk scanned my items she kept going back to "some lady holding a baby" and said she sold those stamps for weeks and never knew it was Mary and Jesus. I put on my best game face and attempted to converse with her. I even managed to say, with a straight face, "It could happen to anyone." As I retrieved my bags, I couldn't help but wish her "Merry Christmas" as I walked away. She responded, "Hey, you too!"

² <https://revaam.wordpress.com/2013/12/20/some-lady-holding-a-baby/>

We can chuckle at that, here in the church. But I love how Masters' describes how this encounter shaped the way she imagined the nativity tableaux – **as miraculously ordinary**, because as she says “too often, as Christians on this side of the story, we forget how ordinary the whole stable scene was. Mary and Joseph were teenagers. In a barn. To all who journeyed to Bethlehem to pay taxes, they were another young couple and another set of numbers. Perhaps someone noticed them along the way and asked Mary when she was due. Perhaps the Innkeeper felt badly and wished them well as he turned them away. Perhaps Joseph went in search of the perfect pregnancy craving driven meal,” Masters opines.

Friends, this is a story that is both miraculous and ordinary. And we celebrate the mystery and emotion. Like the stories we tell our friends and family, stories that we repeat so often that our spouses or children or best friends roll their eyes or try to rush the story and fill in the blanks to get to the part they think is most important or like the best, we continue to tell this story each year in the church. And like every story we tell over and over again, we tell this story because it reveals something important about who we are, something we want other people to know about us – something that speaks to our identity, our values, that things that matter the most to us.

We slow down, we pause, we light candles and gather with family and make special meals and pass down traditions from generation to generation because on that night so long ago, something changed. “Do not be afraid, 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.”

We repeat the words of the prophet Isaiah to remind us that this child born in the manger is different. We heard in our journey to Bethlehem: “For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Prince of peace. We heard Dorinda share the vision of what that peace will look like, “The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them.”

Prince of peace – from the royal lineage of David comes a new kind of king. A king who is born of humble human birth in a stable. A king who ushers in a vision where the poor in spirit receive the kingdom of God, where the meek inherit the land, and the peacemakers are called children of God. A king who is both divine and human – identities that are inseparable, but distinct. This dual nature of Christ is essential for our salvation and essential for the promise of peace. And it is through Bethlehem that our understanding of Christ as divine king and flesh and blood human deepens. In Hebrew, Bethlehem, Bet Lechem, means “house of bread.” I am the bread of life, Jesus tells us in the gospel of John. The bread who nurtures and sustains us, the bread who challenges us to love neighbor as we love ourselves. The bread who leaves us

the peace that surpasses all understanding. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid, Jesus tells us. This is why we tell the story year in and year out.

We tell this story that is both miraculous and ordinary every year because the birth of the Messiah, the anointed savior of the people, changes everything. God chose to dwell with us in human form. To teach us how to love those we think are unlovable, including ourselves. God chose to dwell with us in human form. To heal the cracks and fissures, the breaches and the ruptures, all those ways we make divisions, allowing some to be on the inside and others to remain on the outside looking in. God chose to dwell with us in human form. To make sure all knew they had a place a table, a seat at the banquet, an invitation to taste and see that the gifts of God are for them. God chose to dwell with us in human form. To extend grace upon grace for all of the ways we mess up and don't get it right. To show us what love means in the messy reality of the world where sin pulls us apart from each other and from God. The birth of the Messiah, the anointed savior of the people, changes everything.

Will we be changed this Christmas? Will we get caught up in the hustle and bustle, the busyness of the season? Will we be distracted by the bright shiny lights, the latest technology, even the weather? Or will we allow God to do a new thing? Will we be changed by God breaking into our reality – coming in the flesh – king of kings and yet a vulnerable child?

Amidst all of the gloom and doom, all of the commercialism, I see not only see glimpses of God's love breaking through, I see those signs flooding my vision. I think about the community response to the Knob Hill Apartment fire. I see people joining together across racial and ethnic lines to combat injustices. I see Christmas gifts for refugee and warm coats for school children.

And I see Hope. I see hope in the promise of God who chose to walk with us on this crazy journey of life. O Come, O Come Emmanuel – God With Us. I see hope in the birth of a child, born in the tiny town of Bethlehem and raised in the backwater streets of Nazareth, the desire of nations, to bind all people in one heart and mind, as we have sung throughout the Advent season. I see hope in all the promises that come with the birth of Christ.

When we tell this story from generation to generation, we become messengers of hope and peace, and joy and love. We are given the gift of being a messenger and let us unwrap this gift with the joy it has been given to us. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, 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." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Tell the story, friends, tell the story over and over again, to generation after generation. For it is good news, it is the best news, God is with us, Immanuel.