

Christmas Eve – Year A

Let's all take a deep breath – and let it go. We have made it to Christmas. For these moments, we can rest from the frenetic preparations, lay aside the plans for tomorrow, and settle into the familiar – the carols, this church decked out in greens, and the story of Mary and Joseph and a babe lying in the manger.

Of the four Gospels, the story we just heard of the birth of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke is the only one with any details. Mark's Gospel doesn't mention the birth of Jesus at all. We heard Matthew's reference to the birth of Jesus a few days ago, on the last Sunday of Advent, linking the birth of Jesus to the prophecy from Isaiah, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." After that, he says only that Mary gave birth to a son, and they named him Jesus. In John's gospel, we are told "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us."

So were it not for Luke, we would have no manger or feeding trough to hold the infant Jesus, no shepherds with their smelly and noisy sheep, no angelic proclamation. Luke includes these details, he tells the story of the birth of Jesus this way, to tell us important truth that the other evangelists say outright. While Matthew says of Jesus, "They shall name him Emmanuel – God with us" – and John tells us, "The word became flesh and dwelt among us" – Luke, through this story, tells us the same thing: God took flesh, and showed up *with us* – with the shepherds, with the poor, in the middle of a time of political unrest and oppression. God showed up – in the midst of us.

If you look, you will see that the birth of Jesus is told in the *second* chapter of Luke's Gospel. Before this, Luke has recounted the birth of John the Baptist – to a woman too old to bear children, and the angel's announcement to Mary that she would conceive and bear a son – to which she responds in that wonderful song of the Magnificat: God who is mighty has done great things for me. He has taken the mighty down from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly! He has filled the poor with good things and sent the rich away empty."

As I've said many times before, Luke's Gospel is all about God turning things upside down. And the way he tells the story of the birth of Jesus is no different. This Savior Messiah is born to an unwed mother, in poverty, in an inconvenient place and time. This Savior Messiah is proclaimed first, not in the city where news could spread quickly, not to the rabbis and Pharisees who could have recognized the significance of his birth, but to shepherds out in a field - with eyes and ears open enough to hear and see angels in their midst, and hearts willing to respond to those tidings of great joy.

This story acknowledges that we live in a world that still has imperial forces set out to wield power over others, a world that still struggles with whom to count, or who *does* count. The story acknowledges that people are still homeless and that our lives seldom go as planned. But what this story *proclaims* to us is that God is not content to act only from a heaven light years away. No, in this story of the birth of Jesus, Luke tells us that God has chosen to act from *within* Creation. God has immersed Godself IN the flesh of this tiny, vulnerable child. God's news greets the shepherds right where they are, in a field in the midst of their mundane lives. God announces God's dream of Peace to the shepherds and to us, not in the temple, but in the field of our lives.

What Luke, and Matthew, and John all tell us is the same, whether we hear it spoken straight out, or in a story we can easily tell and remember: In the quiet, mundane, or perhaps chaotic circumstances of our lives, Immanuel is born. God is with us. The word took flesh, and dwelt among us.

There is a story of unknown origins but retold by M. Scott Peck, about a group of monks in a dying monastery. They were few in number, and disheartened. So the abbot decided to visit an old, mystic rabbi who lived in the woods nearby. The abbot asked the rabbi for any advice he might have, and the two sat in silence together for some time. Finally, the abbot got up to leave, and the rabbi said, "I have no advice. I can only tell you that the Messiah is among you." When the abbot returned to the monastery and all the monks gathered, he relayed the rabbi's prophetic words: "The Messiah is among us." – And so the monks looked from one to another, and even looked at themselves. They acted differently toward one another – and even treated themselves with more care. For the Messiah was among them...

The feast of Christmas, the mystery of the Incarnation – that belief that God took flesh and thus is immersed in the very flesh of creation – is not a one-time event in the past. The Messiah is among us. Now it is for us to open our eyes and ears and hearts to see and to believe – not in some past event or a piece of doctrine – but in the reality that our hearts know: The Messiah is among us.

When you look around the table as you share Christmas dinner with your family or friends, open your eyes to see the wonder of Love present there; pause, and allow your heart to be moved, really moved – and you will see, too, the presence of God in your midst. And if you look around the table and see an empty chair, and your heart is moved almost to tears, know that your heart moves then, too, because of Love - and that Love is still present. Your heart knows. That is God, too, breaking into your world.

We heard Isaiah say:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness--
on them light has shined.

It has. And it does. And it will. We have only to open our eyes and let our hearts know. The Messiah is among us.

A blessed Christmas to all.

- [Isaiah 9:2-7](#)
- [Titus 2:11-14](#)
- [Luke 2:1-14\(15-20\)](#)
- [Psalm 96](#)