

Christ is Born

Luke 2:1-20

Our Gospel text this Christmas morning reminds us of the wonder and surprising nature of God's incarnation, God being with us. The preparation for God's coming into the world in Christ happened amid the requirements of daily life and the requirements of imperial politics, which is to say, amid citizenship in the "earthly kingdom." Even as politics, economics, and other forces tried to "name and number the entire world," God established a counterpolitics that placed kingly rule not in the imperial palace of Emperor Augustus but in a Bethlehem manger, whose culmination was not conquest but a cross. Thinking about the political, economic, and social forces that shape our lives and hearts makes this passage relevant. Around Christmas, political and economic forces ask us to buy more presents and put up a fancy tree, but these are not the messages of God's reign.

Amid Hallmark trivialities, we must not lose the scandal of God's incarnation as an infant, outside of town, to a yet-to-be-married couple. They were model outsiders! How many churches, including ours, would turn this pair away if they came knocking at our church doors today? Amid the power of the Roman emperor, few questioned the government's ability to "name time." We understand this because each of us live as citizens in the multiple kingdoms of jobs, work, family, church, and community. I was speaking with colleagues who are mothers and grandmothers of elementary and high school students. They were lamenting the sports schedules that make it difficult to attend church events because of the practice and game scheduled. For one of them the whole summer was spent doing from one game to another and from one tournament to another. Leroy will tell you that the first 20 years of our marriage were spent following the Wilson family calendar. Any of us who have jobs or even

doctor's appointments, not to mention treatment schedules, know how other factors control our lives. This was the situation in which Joseph and Mary found themselves.

But back to Joseph who traveled to Bethlehem for a census registration, not a vacation. He had to obey the rulers of his day, even as God's plans were beginning to unfold a different kingdom. Things are similar in our days dominated by politics and responsibility, let us think about how God's work unfolds, not despite life's other tasks, but in the midst of them. We experience the joy of a sunrise or a sunset; we are blessed by another's kind words, or bless others by words of encouragement. Last Wednesday I was leaving a meeting in Downtown Detroit and made eye contact with a woman getting out our her car and feeding the parking meter. She said, "you are such an angel." She made my day and I witnessed God's unfolding power in the midst of my daily life, encouraging me and give me hope and joy. She redefined joy in the midst of the busy holiday season!

Like Mary and Joseph, on Christmas, many of us know what it is like to leave new homes and return to the town or the family of our birth. Others of us wish we could have that experience but do not, because other rulers demand our time. Some of us undertake the journey home with trepidation, others with joy, some out of obligation, some by choice. Like Mary and Joseph, we undertake it in the midst of life's other challenges and events. We go to particular places, sometimes to the home of our birth, to join a gathering of people that is, or in some cases will become, soaked with memory. It is in those specific places, not in some abstract place, that God's work unfolds. How will you, on this Christmas, and in what ways will you allow God to use you and recognize how God unfolds in your particular lives and particular places today? Will it be the words you give, the reflections and prayers shared as you are with family and friends this afternoon? How will you be an instrument of God's love

and peace and grace? Will your home be the place where your family will have an experience with God?

Often politics does not bend to our needs, as contemporary events make all too clear. Just think about the latest struggles for justice in our community, over any one of a number of issues: clean water, safe communities, equal justice regardless to how your beliefs and life are different from mine. Mary sought shelter to give birth for her child but there was no room. Those who swarmed back for the census earlier had taken the rooms already, leaving Mary and Joseph without a place. Some of us feel there is no room for us in the places we were born either. We feel as if we are relegated to outsider status, that we too have to enter by the back door or sleep down the street. Most of us can remember times we have been shut out of the inn, and what that felt like. Most of us have some memory of exclusion. But we also have blessed memories of ways God's work was done in the midst of that exclusion – someone befriended us; someone said a kind word; someone gave us a smile – you remember the ways God has worked when you felt alone.

Even if things did not go as planned, new life breaks forth. Jesus, God's work, arrived in the midst of political events and no vacancies. The important message of Christmas is that even when things do not go as planned, God arrives! We often forget the scary nature of the first Christmas—that it was all about things that were unexpected, in places unsought. Christ arrived in a manger, in a cattle stall. If the Son of God can arrive in such circumstances, so can truth. So can joy. So can hope. So can peace.

The Gospel reminds us that God appears to the less than perfect and less than powerful. Too often we think God will not speak to us, because we do not go to church often enough, or because we are aware of our sin, or because we think our lives are less than holy, or because some preacher or trusted adult or even the church

has told us so. By appearing to shepherds, God showed God's willingness to appear to any who will listen. God came unexpectedly, at night, to those who were simply going about their daily occupations. The shepherds had not withdrawn from the world to seek holiness; they were simply going about their task, and God appeared. Too often we look for God in the beautiful, in the times and places we set out to seek God. But it is important to remember that it is God who seeks us. Think about the ways that you have seen God move unexpectedly, a moment that you were least expecting the Holy, the Holy showed up and found you.

The good news was addressed first of all to those shepherds outside Bethlehem. The shepherds were probably tired, tending sheep at night. The shepherds were the ordinary people, like you and me. Those shepherds, living away from settled communities, would have been regarded with some suspicion by respectable folk and represent the common, marginalized or outsiders, the sorts of people with whom Jesus would come to associate in his ministry. But, then, unexpectedly, and intrusively, God's messenger appeared. The angels terrified them. They had apparently not been waiting or praying for a message. Rather, God's message interrupted them right where they were in order to announce God's work.

Have you notice how God shows up, even in small and ordinary ways in the midst of what we do. At Christmas, the awe-inspiring and terrifying God whom Moses had to veil his face to see, appeared as an infant. In times like ours, when angels are celebrated as friendly and sentimental characters, it is difficult for us to picture what powerful and unsettling creatures angels can be. Remember that it was God's death angel who brought the tenth plague to all the firstborn of the Egyptians. In this scripture God whispered by the angel, "Do not be afraid; ... I am bringing you good news of great joy" ([v. 10](#)). This is the same call that Jesus echoed throughout his ministry: "Fear not."

At Christ's birth, we have a blessing of peace. God sends us peace. God does not desire huge festivals, frantic preparations, or wish us boundless energy to do everything. Rather, God wishes us peace. **Aaron Klink**

God has sent us his good news. Like Luther noted, "He [the angel] does not simply say: 'Christ is born,' but: '*for you* he is born.'" "What good would it do me, if he were born a thousand times and if this were sung to me every day with the loveliest airs, if I should not hear that there was something in it for me and that it should be my own?"

Christ was born, and later "anointed" "to bring good news to the poor, ... to proclaim release to the captives" (Luke 4:18).

Christmas is the culmination of the Advent season, and we cross from the time of self-examination and preparation to this Christmas time of thankful receiving of God's greatest gift to the world. **Charles M. Wood**

Our competing citizenship will continue in jobs, work, family, church, and community, but in the midst of it all we can allow Christ to be born in us each day. The birth of Christ brings peace to the lives of all who receive him. Merry and blessed Christmas to you and family today!

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