

Christmas Eve 2022

Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus...” I’m sure many of us are continuing that phrase in our heads right now. Words familiar from hearing them over and over. Kind of like, “Once upon a time...”

Maybe we have heard them year after year in this place, or in the brick building behind you that has been here for generations. Perhaps you heard it at other congregations in Iowa or beyond. We come tonight to something that feels familiar. Well worn. We come tonight thinking we know what we are going to find. The same songs we sing every year. That familiar story from Luke. The joy of the candle lighting as we sing *Silent Night*. Time together as a family gathered in this place.

Some come expectantly, eager to hear and see the spectacle of Christmas. The bells and band playing. The glow of candles and the tree. The sound of a hundred plus voices lifted in song together. Children and adults dressed in their traditional Christmas Eve garb.

Some come out of obligation, to satisfy mom, or grandma. Often coming bored and staying that way. I’ve been to a Christmas Eve service where one gentleman spent the entire service watching something on his phone. (A little hint- like teachers, we can tell what you’re doing).

The story is so familiar we often don't even really pay attention, but if I have learned anything from my journey so far in reading through the Bible in a year, it is that when you pay attention to what seems familiar, things that I thought I knew have new surprises in them.

So, I invite us all to hear this story again. To set aside those past expectations, the boredom, and enter into the story. To put ourselves in the shoes of the shepherds watching their flock on a normal evening, who have their hum-drum existence broken into not only by the unexpected but by the unbelievable.

A sky filled with angels- singing a song of glory to God. And with news... that in Bethlehem- a suburb of the holy city of Jerusalem- is born the promised Messiah. The one who the prophet Isaiah gives many titles- Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father. Under whose reign peace will extend throughout the whole world. The author of Titus calls him the grace of God. Matthew's title is Emmanuel, God with us.

At this point you might respond, Yes, yes, words we have heard many times before. But what do they mean? What do they mean in a world 2000 plus years later where Ukrainians and Russians killed each other today, where gun violence takes 55 lives in the US each day. Where hatred, anger, indignation are held up as virtuous and expected emotions. Where power is literally fought over.

Those words mean the same today as they did then because the world Jesus was born into wasn't much different. The Romans ruled their far-flung empire by fear and intimidation. They would crucify by the thousands those who rebelled against their rule. Any threat to their political power was dealt with immediately and severely.

It is into this world that Jesus is born. And he's something different. Unexpected.

It is something we don't pay much attention to, but it is unusual that Jesus- the promised Messiah- is born, not in the halls of power. Not to a priestly family serving God in the Temple, not a child of Franklin Graham or Rick Warren. Not to a family of the ruling class- a Bush or a Kennedy. Not to wealth or power- a child of Elon Musk or Bill Gates. Instead, he is born to ordinary parents from a barely known town in the rural backwater of Galilee. A nobody.

The birth of this Messiah, the great ruler, priest, and warrior is not announced on Twitter, Facebook or on the newscast. It is not special news delivered to the politically connected, the rich and powerful.

Instead, other than Mary and Joseph and those who heard the first wail of the newly born child, the first to know are shepherds. The cowboys or truckers of their day to whom the news is given by angelic messengers from God. What would it be like to receive that message? Out of the blue as you are going over the road or doing night rounds on the herd. News that the long awaited one who would free them, not only from the heavy hand of the Roman Empire but from the sinfulness of human nature, was born nearby.

What is their response? To go see. Out of sheer curiosity if nothing else. Okay, that was weird. Let's go check it out! But did you also hear it? What the angels said? That this child is born "to you". Not for you, but to you. The child is theirs- come to them- the unknown, unnamed, and mostly forgotten of society. The child does not come to the rich, the powerful, the wealthy, the comfortable. He comes to you, who are most vulnerable in society.

And when the shepherds arrive they find, a regular house, Mary, Joseph, and a child. A normal family with a newborn. Something they have probably seen before, but this is different. Somehow.

I don't buy that Jesus didn't cry. Baby's cry. It's how the communicate- I'm hungry, I'm cold, I pooped my pants. I don't think Mary was primed and perfect. That Joseph was stoic and unmoved. They had just gone through labor and many in this room know what that means- especially without an epidural.

No, I think it was different because of who these people were. Mary, so young, but also with an inner strength. A strength that Luke points out many places but especially through her song about Jesus, the Magnificat. A statement of how she will raise Jesus to be who God is. A God who looks first to the lowly, the poor, the immigrants and strangers in the land. Who will cast the mighty from their thrones, not to take their power, their riches. But so that those who are on the outside, have a share of the power, the riches, the food. So that all might have enough. Just like the manna in the Wilderness.

They see a child, like any other, two eyes, two ears, nose and mouth, but... with something about him. Perhaps that feeling you get sometimes when you look into the eyes of a child and they aren't unfocused but they lock onto you, they seem to peer right into you. What did they see in the eyes of this newborn child?

They share with this unremarkable but special family what they have been told. About this child, who he is, what he will do. And then they go, proclaiming, telling anyone who will listen what they have seen and heard.

Friends, regardless of why you are here tonight, you do not come as spectators of a play, and one that you have seen many times before. Instead, you are like the shepherds, participants in the story. In this mission of Jesus. To see for yourselves with new eyes and then go telling anyone who will listen what you have seen and heard tonight.

That into this broken, messy, selfish world is born Emmanuel- God with us. Jesus who brings/embodies a message of good news. A different kind of king. One who brings a different message to be proclaimed and heard.

Who brings tidings of comfort and joy. Not fear and mistrust. Not the unease that Herod brings. A ruler who does not offer thoughts and prayers, but who goes to sit with people on the ash heap of their life. To grieve as they mourn, to heal when they are ill, to feed when they are hungry, to listen when they are hurt. Who comes to bring justice for all and peace to the world. And who calls his followers to do the same.

This warrior brings not conflict and death, but peace and life. His weapons are not sword and gun but love, compassion, understanding, patience. He accepts the blows of those who are so unsettled by what he brings that they kill him out of fear, and he ask God to forgive them just the same.

They reject his vision as foolishness, unrealistic, not the way the world works. But does the world really work how it is now, lived according to our rules? What if we were so bold as to trust the child in the manger and love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us. To not bear false witness about their motives and thoughts, but to talk with them. To find out who they are, what they are thinking, and why. To gaze into their eyes seeking to understand them in the same way the

child looks into the eyes of those shepherds. Into your eyes. And sees something worthy, one created in the image of God.

We come tonight not to witness an empty ritual and a familiar story, but to experience the reality of Emmanuel, God with us, Jesus. Who comes to us this night. Now, here, in this place. In the W

ord sung, read, and proclaimed. In love given and shared. In this flat bread and sweet wine- the Body and Blood of the crucified and risen one that this child is and was.

We come to sing hymns not out of nostalgia, but with the writer of the psalm and the choir of angels. To rejoice! Because life does not have to be this way. Because God has not left us to our own devices, thanks be to God, because on our own we suck at this!

We come... for all kinds of reasons. And I am thankful that you have. And I pray that as you go, something from this time will go with you. Perhaps you will go like the shepherds, glorifying and praising God for what you have seen and heard this evening. Perhaps you will be like Mary, quietly pondering all these things. Perhaps, in the midst of opening presents, watching ball games, eating meals, something from tonight will catch you. And you will feel the presence of Jesus upon you, like the eyes of a child. Looking at you- with all your incredible gifts and abilities, with your messiness and faults and you will hear that voice say, "I love you, come and follow me."

On this night I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Thanks be to God.

