

December 24, 2018

(Luke 2: 1 - 20)

**In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Here, on Christmas Eve, have you ever noticed the hush that often settles over the reading of the nativity story from the gospel of Luke?

I sense a deepening of the silence that normally accompanies the reading of Scripture. An increased attentiveness. A heightened expectation. Maybe it is the solemnity of the evening, as we gather, candles in hand, to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. Perhaps it is the weight of tradition, aware that we listen to passages all Christians have heard for centuries. But perhaps it is also the breathtakingly simple, yet surprisingly powerful, story of a young girl giving birth to her first child, attended only by shepherds and stable animals...but heralded by angels above.

By all rights, of course, it is a story that should not even have been noticed, let alone told again and again across millennia. After all, countless young girls gave birth that very night and we remember none of them. It is interesting that the "smallness" of Mary's story is set off by Luke's narrative setting: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus... while Quirinius was governor." Hear the difference? Emperors and governors are appropriate subjects for dramatic narratives; unwed teenage mothers and their vulnerable babies are not. But Luke locates this simple story amid the powers and principalities of the age of that time to make this claim: The child born to this young mother will change the course of history, and the fates of leaders and common folk alike hang in the balance of his destiny.

I suspect that, on one level, we ha've forgotten just how audacious, if not downright outlandish, Luke's claim is. So accustomed to the slow and graceful reading of this passage, we may miss the irony of setting this newborn baby beside the emperor of the known world as if the two could possibly have anything to do with one another. At a deeper level, however, I have a hunch that we do recognize something of the absolute, even absurd vulnerability of Mary and her child, and that their very vulnerability may be a large part of what moves us.

Few of us, after all, have much experience with anything miraculous, be it the relatively small-scale miracle of turning water into wine or the grand event of resurrection that this humble beginning leads to. Those markers of events in our faith story do not touch us deeply. What do you or I know about changing water into wine, etc. and etc.?

But, the vulnerability of a newborn? The fear and hope bundled together in the heart of a new born's mother? These are things we have felt in spades.

Spread it out further. How many among us gathered this Christmas Eve are coming with worry about a still beleaguered economy or a faltering relationship? How many come overshadowed by illness or filled with foreboding about the safety of a loved one serving abroad? How many of us are weighed down by caring for an elderly loved one...even if it is ourselves...or a disabled family member?

The simple truth of the matter is that each and all of us, whether dressed in our holiday best or not, have been marked by the everyday hardships of this life. And, so we are well acquainted with the sheer frailty of the unlikely lead characters in Luke's tale. We instinctively feel for them, and each Christmas we are simultaneously surprised, humbled, and encouraged to hear the promise that God is at work through them for us.

In this respect, perhaps we are like the shepherds called from their fields. At the bottom of the socio-economic world of first-century Palestine, the shepherds have no right, no expectation, no hope in the world of being touched by the divine. None. They are the lowest of the low. So it is little wonder, then, that they are terrified by the appearance of the heavenly host. It is not too much to wonder if perhaps they obey only because they can think of no other response to the angelic summons. "Let us now go..." indeed!)

And, so they run...RUN...to the stable. Stumble upon the tender....or is it meager?...scene of this mother and child and wonder what on heaven or earth they have seen. They tell others what they have witnessed....what else can you do when you've been touched by the divine?...and all are amazed by what has happened.

That is the story for tonight. The story we know so well...as it was told then. But what about now?

Here is the promise of Christmas in a nutshell. God looks to dwell...the word is "dwell", to live...not with the high and mighty, but with the lowly. The unexpected. Those considered "nothing" by this world. And here, centered in the weakness and vulnerability and incomparable intimacy of human birth, God makes God's intentions for humanity fully known. God is love, John writes, and here Luke portrays that love is made manifest as God takes human form. The infinite now becomes finite, and that which is imperishable becomes perishable.

The genius of Luke's story, of course, is that he portrays all this through the simple, sympathetic,

and even everyday characters of a young mother and common shepherds. If God can work in and through such ordinary characters, we are urged to wonder, perhaps God can also work in and through us as well. Luke wants, I think, to make sure we realize that it is not just human flesh "in general" that God takes on in Christ; it is our flesh. And it is not simply history "in general" that God enters through this birth, it is our history and our very lives to which God is committed.

So if there is only one thing that we might hear this Christmas Eve, perhaps it should be that this story of long ago is not only about angels and shepherds, and about a mother and her newborn. It is also about us...all of us gathered amid the candles and readings, carols and prayers. God came at Christmas for us, that we might have hope and courage amid the dark and dangerous times and places of our lives.

This, in the end, is why we gather, so that as God entered into time and history so long ago through the Word made flesh, God might also enter our lives even now through the Word proclaimed in Scripture, song, and sermon.

It is no wonder we grow quiet, in the enduring Silent Night company with the Father, and with the Son, and with the Holy Spirit.

Amen.