

Manger People
Luke 2:1-20
Christmas Eve, 2008

I should probably sit down now. What can you say about this story – with its familiar characters, phrases, and rhythms? There are some stories in scripture that are so gripping – so mysteriously full of truth and wonder – that they draw people in simply by the telling. This is one of those stories.

Tonight, all around the world, there are churches full of people hearing this familiar story. No doubt that you, as I, have heard preachers get a couple of jabs in on Christmas Even when they notice their pews filled with faces they hardly recognize. Often they take Christmas as an opportunity to chastise those who can't find it in their hearts to attend more regularly.

I hope that we do not do that here. To be sure, I think that there is a deeper fullness to be found as a member and regular attendee of a church – be it this one or another. But when I encounter unfamiliar faces on this night, more than anything else, I am convinced of the amazing power of this story; a story that brings people inside the doors of the church only to send them out filled with the good news that the light shines in the darkness...even in the darkness of our world.

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And so the story begins... “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered...”

This story is so familiar to us that we overlook the significance of how it is framed. It is in the face of an act of imperial power which demanded that all citizens be counted, and in the face of a “peace” that is secured by the sword – that the Christ child enters the world.

As Mary and Joseph trudge into Bethlehem, they are an afterthought to those who hold power. They are nothing but a number – another couple to be taxed and counted. They are without a place – forced to

stay in a cattle stall. Their only visitors are shepherds – the bottom feeders of social respectability.

And yet, it is within the quiet midst of this hardly visible gathering that God chooses to enter into the fabric of our world. In a far-flung corner of the all-powerful Roman Empire the Almighty slips onto the scene.

This story that is so familiar to us that we forget it is a scandalous tale. It is revolutionary. To believe that love is greater than hate! That the power of relationship is stronger than the threat of violence! That forgiveness would overcome the need to be forgiven!

The story of Jesus' birth is a scandalous tale. And to think that the One who would announce this new kingdom – this new kingdom built on the foundation of love, relationship, and forgiveness – to think that God would announce this new kingdom through a humble birth, a humble life, and a humble death adds to the scandal.

And yet – it wasn't to high profile parents that Jesus came; it wasn't in luxurious accommodation; it wasn't to the adulation of the powerful that Jesus was welcomed. God entered into – and forever changed – the world through a babe who was wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger. And hardly anyone noticed.

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The good news of tonight – and of the mystery of the incarnation – is this: that God cares enough to enter into the messiness of life. One of my former teachers said that, “Christmas is the story of a radical invasion of God into the real world where we live all year long – a world where there is political unrest and injustice, poverty, hatred, jealousy, and both the fear and the longing that things could be different.”¹

The good news of tonight – that this familiar story assures us of – is that there is nothing we have felt or experienced that God has not felt or experienced as one of us.

¹ Guthrie, Shirley, *Christian Doctrine*.

As we receive that good news, God calls us to embody it; to live it out; to lead lives that are built on the foundation of love, relationships, forgiveness and humility.

There are implications for living this kind of life. In a bigger-is-better, might-is-right, it's-not-personal-it's-business kind of world – living a life based on love, relationship, forgiveness, and humility means that we will be different. That we will be at odds with what our culture values. We might even be ignored. And that's okay. Because as the church of Jesus Christ, we aren't motivated by power or influence – we are motivated by faithfulness and discipleship.

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Sometimes being faithful means standing in contrast to the rest of our fast-paced world.

One my family's traditions each year in preparation for the season is to watch "A Charlie Brown Christmas." It comes on television every year, sandwiched between the big budget Christmas productions. If you know children or grandchildren who watch cartoons, you will quickly see that even the animation of Charlie Brown is in stark contrast to most everything produced today. Instead of fluid, high resolution, life-like movement – the characters are jerky and one-dimensional. Their dialogue is not developmentally appropriate. They use big words like "sarcasm" and "responsibility." It is simple, old-fashioned...and we love it.

Charlie Brown is the epitome of someone who just doesn't get it – someone who is at odds with the culture around him. In "A Charlie Brown Christmas," Charlie is trying to direct a simple Christmas pageant with his friends. It is a disaster. People are unhappy about their parts; Schroeder plays the wrong kind of music; Snoopy can't behave. Charlie brings in a simple (and scrawny) Christmas tree to add to the props on stage...another disaster. His friends laugh: "You're such blockhead Charlie Brown!"

Just when he is ready to give up, with an exasperated "doesn't anybody remember the true meaning of Christmas?!" Linus steps out into the spotlight on center stage. "I do," he says. And then he recites

a familiar story...in the King's English... "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, and angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid..."

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Doesn't anybody remember the true meaning of Christmas?

There is a myth that Christmas is the busiest time of year for people who work in the church. In reality, things tend to slow down a bit. This Christmas I have taken the chance to listen to how members of this church have embodied the meaning of the season.

A group of people carved, painted and delivered hand-made toys to children in need. Someone else formed a relationship with a homeless woman who knits hats – which are now being sold in our church.

"It is no big deal," they said – as their lives intersected with the lives of the poor.

Some of you have made it a point to invite those who have lost family or who are without friends into your homes for a meal this Christmastide.

"It is no big deal," you said – as you comforted the lonely and the brokenhearted.

I have heard about one of you taking this Christmas to attempt to mend a broken relationship.

"It is no big deal," she said – as the process of reconciliation began

And through your stories, the transforming, incarnational work of God's kingdom is taking hold.

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It wasn't a big deal. Nobody of any importance really noticed. They were just a couple coming to Bethlehem to be counted. The time

came for her to have the child, and the child was born. Then, because there was no room for them in the inn, she wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger.

In a manger.

The Love that has forever changed the world – that saved all of us from the power of sin; that has motivated countless kingdom acts; that has challenged – and continues to challenge – the idea of what the world considers “powerful” – was laid in a manger.

It was a quiet night, and aside from the startling presence of the angels to the those shepherds on the outskirts of town, nobody noticed.

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A lot has changed since that night in Bethlehem. To be sure, there are still places in our world where no one notices the signs of God’s presence...where power and peace are still defined by strength and control.

And yet tonight, all over our city and all over our world, there are people gathered – much like us – to hear this ancient story one more time. We are drawn in because it is familiar; because it is comfortable; and because we have noticed that it is true:

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Thanks be to God – who from the manger calls us to share and embody this good news.

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Amen.