

C Christmas Eve 12.24.18

Luke 2:1-20

Focus Statement: You have a place at the manger

It feels weird to me that it's Christmas Eve, but there's no snow on the ground and it's been in the forties all week. I don't know why this feels weird to me. I'm from southern California, a place where we sang I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas with the same seriousness as we sang Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer. Every kid knows reindeers fly and unless Grandma decided to do some roofing on midnight on Christmas Eve, Grandma is perfectly safe. But even though the forecast says it should be in the sixties and sunny tomorrow when I get to my parents' house, like it was for every Christmas of my childhood, there's still this part of me that grew up with the same Norman Rockwell paintings as you all did and feels like there's something missing, like it's not quite Christmas, without snow.

And beyond snow, the whole Christmas season is a time thick with expectation. We often come into this holiday with this vision in our minds of how this is supposed to be, and rarely does expectation meet reality. Maybe it's a simple thing. The church office computer met its untimely demise on Wednesday. Inconvenient and anxiety-producing, yes, but we're still here, we still have bulletins. Gwen's friend rescued the files from the now-fried motherboard, Gwen worked on the bulletin on her home computer, and it all worked out. Even if it hadn't and we were sharing copies of the hymns copied out of the office hymnal, it still would have worked out and it would have made a good story. Like the time the power went out mid-worship and we all had to migrate to the social hall. Maybe your Christmas crisis is like the office Christmas crisis, the goose got over-cooked, or the dishwasher chose

today to die, or your family got stuck in traffic, something annoying and frustrating and not what you'd envisioned, but something that will make a hilarious Christmas tale for years to come.

But maybe too, the misplaced expectations are more serious. The relationship you'd hoped could mend cannot. The loved one's absence stings more severely than you expected. The grief, fear, disappointment, sadness, pulls stronger in the festive lights and sounds of this "most wonderful time of the year." In a culture, and a season, so all-consumed with a carefully curated joy, it feels like there shouldn't be space for anything but radiance on this night. So what do we do when real life creeps in, when our actual humanness messes with the perfect divinity of how we imagine this season to be?

The good news is that there is no scene more unexpected, more messy, then the one we hear this night. First off, we have an angel who came to two families to proclaim to them their role in ushering in God's salvation. But these two families were not leaders or rulers, kings or diplomats, warriors or wise sages. They were an aging priest and his equally aged wife living their days in the hill country of Judea, and an unmarried teenager and her cautious fiancée from the even more unlikely region of the Galilee. These are the two families who were to give birth to, to raise, the one who would be called "Prophet of the Most High" and the one who would be called "Son of the Most High" and "Son of God." When the people had heard the "promises made to their ancestors" and the words God "spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets," that God would "raise up a mighty savior... in the house of his servant David," this was not the branch of the Davidic family tree that

they imagined such a savior would come. People who are supposed to be powerful, people who are to change, to save, the world, are supposed to be strong and mighty and, well, have power. A pretty far cry from two babies born in out-of-the-way corners of society. At least Moses had the whole basket switch-a-roo and was raised by the daughter of the Pharaoh. These two had no indication that they could possibly be the Savior of the world and his messenger. The Angel Gabriel's proclamation, Mary's Magnificat, and Zechariah's Benedictus notwithstanding, Jesus does not have the pedigree to be the sort of successor to David for whom the people of God had been waiting.

And then there's the manger scene itself. Mary and Joseph, relegated to the barn because there was "no room for them in the inn." The King of Kings resting not on pillows of silk, but in feed trough. Not attended to by servants, but lulled to sleep by the rustling of cattle, sheep, and goats. And despite the pastoral quietude with which the scene is portrayed, I went with my godson on his class trip to the farm this fall and was reminded that there is one dimension of barns that really cannot be captured in images, the smell. It smells in barns. The sickly sweet, cloying aroma of livestock packed in a contained space is something that never comes up. There are a lot of Christmas theme scented candles this time of year, but no one ever sells manger-scented ones. If we want to really remember the reason for the season that may be a missed marketing opportunity.

And then we pan out from the manger a bit, and there are some shepherds. Which shepherds have a bit of a mixed metaphor here. Because on one hand, shepherds were an image of kingship in the Old Testament. King David, from who's line Jesus has come, was

himself a shepherd, and his kingship was often described as shepherding Israel. Protecting it from invaders and watching over it as a shepherd cares for his sheep. But, on the other hand, the shepherds in this story actual shepherds, not metaphors for royalty. And actual shepherds bear about as much similarity to King David as Christmas-spice scented candles bear to an actual manger. It's a pretty image, until you get a whiff of it. But these are the people who are given the first notice that a savior has been born. Not Herod in his palace in Jerusalem, Quirinius in Syria, or Emperor Augustus way off in Rome, all three locations, by the way, way more expected places for the birth of a king who would shepherd God's people. But this angel appeared to actual shepherds, in a field, with sheep. Who immediately upon hearing the news dropped what they were doing, or more likely gathered their sheep with them and brought them along, to see this promised Messiah.

So friends, on this night of all nights, I invite you to put aside your expectations of what this night should be, and who you should be to enter into it. Put aside whatever poor measuring device, be it paycheck or pant size or general holiday cheeriness, under which you are not measuring up, and just be in the promise of the presence of our infant savior. Because trust me, I can smell you, or, more accurately, I cannot smell you, so I can say with great confidence, there is nothing about you that is weirder or more unexpected or ill-fitting than where the Christ child was actually born. Jesus was not born into a Norman Rockwell painting, Jesus was born into our world, into our lives. It is in the mess, the real mess and muck and reality of this world that God came, that God wanted to come, and that God still comes.

So, if only for tonight, set aside your expectations, and just wonder at the sight. For as the Angel Gabriel once said to shepherds in a field, “To you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Thanks be to God. Amen.