

C Christmas Eve 12.24.21

Luke 2:1-20

Focus: You can't always get what you want, but God gives you what you need.

One of my colleagues pointed out something to me this week that in all the years I've read the Christmas story in Luke's Gospel, I'd never noticed. There are no angels in the nativity scene itself. The story as a whole is thick with angels. Or at least, it's thick with the angel Gabriel who appears to be trying to reach some sort of end of the year frequent flyer mile cut off, jetting from the temple in Jerusalem with Zechariah, to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a woman engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, and then back to Jerusalem or that region at least, to announce the birth to a bunch of shepherds, accompanied on that appearance by a multitude of his angel brethren. But after that last appearance, verse fifteen tells us that the angels left them and went up to heaven, and then the shepherds set out to Bethlehem to "see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord ha[d] made known to [them]." When they got there, they "found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger." But there was no angel. Just an exhausted mother, a bewildered father, and a straw covered infant.

When I realized that despite all the angels floating over creche scenes I've seen, that image wasn't technically biblically accurate, I started to think of all the other places the angel wasn't. Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, but not Elizabeth. She had to trust the writing and hand gestures of her now mute husband. Gabriel appeared to Mary, and then sent her to travel a hundred miles by herself—no small feat for an unmarried first century woman—to gain comfort from her cousin Elizabeth. And six months after returning from Elizabeth's home, when Joseph informed Mary they had to set out again, this time with her fully

pregnant, back to Jerusalem, because the Emperor had decided for reasons known only to him, that everyone had to register for taxes not where they lived, but where their ancestors were from, still no angel. No angel when the inn was full and they had to bunk up with the animals. No angel as the child was born, and Mary wrapped him in bands of cloth. No angel when a herd of shepherds invaded their small dwelling, with news that they had seen an angel, who they couldn't see anymore. "But Mary treasured all these words, and pondered them in her heart."

And let's pause here for a moment and look at this word pondered. The Greek here is *soonballousan* which doesn't have the same serene feel as the English pondered. When I think of Mary pondering something I see her sitting calm and quiet, reflecting on the beauty of the moment, the miracle of her son, the grandeur of his future. But *soonballousan* has more of a sense of jumbled, mixed up, or puzzled. Knowing this gives me a much more relatable Mary, sitting in the hay, staring at her newborn son, at the husband she barely knows yet, at the shepherds who just trucked in from quite literally God only knows, and thinking, how in the world did I get here, and what will happen now. We know from scripture, from her conversation with Gabriel and the power of her song, that Mary was all in on the call of God on her life, but *soonballousan* tells us that Mary had some doubts as well. That treasure and terror can coexist in one heart, that joy and pain walk side by side. Not opposites or opponents, but allies and companions.

I was thinking about all this this week as I was reflecting on the wild ride of last Christmas, how we didn't know what we were doing and everything was grand experimentation and

hopes for the best. Our Jewish sisters and brothers often close their Passover celebration with a song that ends “Next year in Jerusalem” a phrase that represented the reckless wild hope for a homeless people. This year we gather on the road but next year, we will worship in Jerusalem. Christmas Eve last year had a bit of a next year in Jerusalem vibe to it. Facebook memories just reminded me of all the weird and wonderful details of that night. Leading communion in a hat, mittens, mask, and a coat under my alb and chasuble. Not knowing who I was worshipping with, because everyone else was similarly adorned and masked, meaning I saw only their eyes. Discovering that though it was a still night, it was not still enough for Silent Night with candles, and also we only know the first verse of Silent Night anyway. Laughter ensued. Then going inside with the six people helping with the full virtual worship, praying my phone, sucked of battery by the cold outdoor part, would make it through. Which, it did, though with four percent battery left. It was not Christmas as we were used to, and there was a lot of “next year, when we’re back inside.” But it was Christmas nonetheless. Music was made, scripture was read, community grew, and God was present. God, we learned last year, has no problem traveling through the internet.

So much of not just last Christmas but the past two years have been an exercise in wild experimentation. We closed in March 2020 on faith that it was the right decision, went outside in May on the same hope and prayer. Returned to virtual in November, back outside last May and then inside and in masks now, not because we know it’s the best decision, but because we hope it is. And now as news of the omicron variant increased, as hospitals filled up again, we find ourselves circling back to the same questions. Maybe we should be virtual right now, maybe our collective vaccination levels means we should all be

ripping off our masks and sitting shoulder to shoulder. We don't know. But we guess and hope. We try our best to care for each other, to follow how God is calling us to be, and we hope against hope that our best is enough. Just like everyone in this Christmas story. Mary didn't know what giving birth to the Son of God would mean, not really. She knew parts, sure, but much was just hope and faith that she would be up to the task. Joseph didn't know how to raise up a faithful man of God when that man was God. But he gave it his best. The innkeeper didn't know who he was welcoming, when he made room for the desperate young couple, finding some space when there was none. The shepherds didn't know what they'd find in Bethlehem, if they'd be accepted when they God there. But they went, as the angel told them. And when they got there, they made known all that was told them about this child. And everyone who heard them was amazed.

Dear people of God, we all wish at times for just one more appearance by the angel to confirm where we are headed. And we don't, can't, get that clarity. But what we have from the promise of this night is that right in the middle of our confusion and uncertainty, there lies Jesus, waiting for us. Not saying much, at this point he's a baby, but he grows up to be a big fan of parables, so clarity never really one of his great concerns. But he's here. Not needing us to understand, not waiting for us to get it right. Who is just here, with us. Believing that our best efforts, or even our not best efforts, because let's be real, we don't always give our best selves all the time, or even most of the time, but believing that ourselves, who we are, is beloved in the eyes of God is father, and is worthy of grace and love and presence. The angel isn't here, dear people of God. We don't get to know where

we're going. But Jesus is here. Jesus always is. So know that you are in the right place, in your space, in your life, in your world. You are who God has called you to be. Amen.