

C Christmas Eve 12.24.24

Luke 2:1-20

Focus Statement: Christ comes in the messiness of our real lives

Nik turned six months old on Sunday, so I found myself reflecting this week on the event of his birth. And, I'll be straight with you, Travis and I both agree, the day of Nik's birth was not the best day of our lives. Nik, let me be clear, is the best day of our lives. Nik the living, breathing human thing, five stars, would recommend. But the actual day of his birth was quite unenjoyable for all involved, Nik included. When Nik was born, the first words the doctor uttered were "this baby is stunned," and Travis and I got our first glimpse of a grumpy blueish-purple thing, little fists in the air, mouth wide open in a silent yell. If he could remember it, I'm sure he'd tell you that being born was not the best day of his life either.

So it's Christmas Eve, the night of Christ's birth, and we come to this night with so many hopes and expectations for what this night, this holiday, this moment in time is supposed to feel like. Expectations caught up in history, culture, and for some of us, one too many Hallmark movies. To us is born, this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. And there is this feeling that we too should be caught up in the good news of great joy. The story of Jesus birth is so well-known, so iconic and idealized, so distinct from what many of us actually experience, that I think it's worth remembering that we are not the only ones who may feel unsettled this night. In fact, I'd wager a guess that the night Mary gave birth to the Son of God may have been the greatest night in history, but it likely was not, or at least did not seem like, the greatest night in Mary and Joseph's lives. It likely felt messy and chaotic, out of control and unsettling.

Luke's Gospel is all about contrast, about things not being what they seem. About the weakness of power and the strength of the weak. About how the worst thing that can happen is never the last thing that will happen, and what seems like impossible is only the beginning. We've seen that throughout the first chapter of Luke, when an angel appeared to two unlikely sets of parents, announcing the births of sons who would be great. Those contrasts continue in tonight's Gospel.

Our Gospel for tonight started, as Luke likes to start his stories, with a placing in history. This story takes place when Emperor Augustus set out a decree that all the world should be registered. For those not up on your ancient Roman Imperial history, here's what you need to know about Augustus. First off, his name wasn't Augustus, it was Octavian. Augustus, from the Latin *augere* (meaning "to increase") was a title given to him by the Senate. It can be translated as "illustrious one" or "sublime." Most importantly, it was not a political designation, but a religious one. Octavian Augustus is a god, or might as well be, for the power he wields.

Octavian received this title and was seen as this semi-divine figure because it was under his leadership that all of Rome was consolidated under one leader into one Empire, creating a two-hundred-year reign of relative peace. I say "relative peace" because, as we've talked about before, the Pax Romana, the so called "peace of Rome" was only peaceful because it was oppressive. This was peace through the crushing strength of the empire, not the sort of creative, life-giving, sustaining peace, a peace that brings joy, that we think about when we

think about peace. Peace through fear and peace through love are two very different kinds of peace. This was the former.

By telling us that this decree went out in the time of Emperor Augustus, more than giving us the historical timing of Jesus' birth, Luke is making a claim of who Jesus is over and against the emperor. Things are not always what they seem; Luke is telling us. The loudest voice is not correct just because it is loud. While all the world is shouting of a peace through strength and oppression, through power and might, the Son of God was born in obscurity. This could not have been the best day of Mary and Joseph's lives. Far from home, forced to travel, their lives upended by the political machinations of others. Alone in a strange and crowded city, away from familiar faces, delivering their first child in a stable among the animals, no one willing or able to give up even space for a pregnant girl and her nervous husband. This is not how kings are born. Even the fanfare at Christ's birth was off kilter. When the heavenly host came to sing hosannas in praise of the Son of God, that message came not to the powerful, but to shepherds in their fields, alone with their sheep.

Dear people of God, here's what I love about the incarnation. Here's what I love about this strange simple story of a God who slipped into skin and came to walk among us. It is a story that happens despite humanity, not because of us. He came in the proclamation of an angel to a young woman who, in a voice that I have to imagine shook just a little in declaring this, responded, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." He came to a couple with no place to go, uprooted by politics, alone and afraid. He came to shepherds in a field, filled first with fear and then with awe, and they went forth

from this news glorifying and praising God. He came in the quiet contemplation of Mary's heart, as she treasured and pondered all that had taken place. He came in the wilderness, when John proclaimed, "You brood of vipers." He came in teaching and preaching, healing and feeding. He came in death on a cross, in the surprising stillness of an empty tomb, in the breath of the Spirit, in the promise to come again.

Dear people of God, the beauty and promise and hope of the incarnation is this: No one is having their best day when Jesus comes. No one is living their best life when Jesus comes. That's kind of the point. Jesus comes in the real messiness of humanity. In our real human lives, with real human struggles and real human pain and real human fears. The greatness of this night, of this God, of being a resurrection people, isn't based on how we feel or live or are, it is based on a God who loves us so much that God came to earth to be with us, took on the frailty and messiness of our lives, and then went to the cross and died for us so that death might be defeated.

Dear people of God, maybe tonight is the best night of your life. Maybe everything you imagined tonight would be it has been, and you are exactly who you want to be. That's amazing, and Jesus still comes. Maybe tonight is not your best night. Maybe this day, this year, this life, has not turned out the way you thought it would, could, should. Maybe you're sitting here barely hanging on. Guess what, Jesus still comes. In power and in pain, in joy and sorrow, in a shepherd's shout of praise and a woman's quiet contemplation, to you, you, who you are, as you are, where you are, is born this day, a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. And this will be a sign for you, that we still gather, some two-thousand years later, to

hear of the birth of a child born in a stable and laid in a manger. The one for whom the world had no place for has made a place for us in the very heart of God. Thanks be to God.

Amen.