



SUNDAY SERMON

God finds a way

The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 2, verses 1 to 20.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Break open our hearts and minds to receive you anew. Amen.

Being a priest, my father spent most of Christmas Eve at church. Being a child, I loved Christmas Eve, but Dad's busy-ness that night kept it from being the cozy family affair it might have been. So for us kids it was a real treat the year Dad was not serving in a church. My parents packed my brother, sister and me into the car and we drove north to the old Vermont farmhouse where we spent many summers-but never before or after that one year did we spend Christmas.

The snow was deep as we trudged through the field to the woods beyond, and selected a tree to cut down. Perfect Christmas trees are grown on farms; ours more closely resembled Charlie Brown's; it was perfect. We had not brought the box of Christmas lights and decorations, so we made strings of cranberries and popcorn—which breaks easily when you try to thread it. Our strands were modest; perfect. As the snow continued to fall in deepening silence, our little family tucked together by the fire and read stories. It was just us—no less, no more—with whatever family dynamics were at play, but the glow lingers in my memory.

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After college, I spent a year in Kyoto immersed in the practice of Zen Buddhism and the Japanese tea ceremony. Ironically, mischievously, God in Christ awakened faith within me that year. It was cold, mid-December, when I realized with a start that Christmas was fast approaching. Nothing around me, nothing in the culture—the stores or advertisements—announced the coming of a savior, or even the coming of Santa Claus. I wondered philosophically, would Christmas happen if no one observed it? Taking no chances, I found a church, the Anglican Episcopal church. Worship was in Japanese—much of which I could not understand. But I was welcomed, embraced, and could follow enough to know that I was home for Christmas.

The first years of our marriage, Sarah and I lived in Paterson, New Jersey—an impoverished, old mill city. I ran a shelter for forty homeless men. Volunteers from suburban congregations came each night with supper, prayers, and good wishes. We tried to create warmth, but the cavernous gothic hall was hard to heat and the streets outside were dangerous at night. On Christmas Eve morn, I received a call from a woman asking if she could bring cookies. Of course. That night, she and her two daughters, perhaps nine and twelve, looked decidedly out of place with their blond hair, nice clothes and bright red sweaters. They carried in tray upon tray of delicate hand-decorated Christmas cookies, an abundance for the men to eat. I asked what prompted this outpouring of Christmas cheer. The woman told me it was the first Christmas since they'd lost her husband, their father. I was afraid we'd just end up feeling sorry for ourselves; I thought it would be good if we did something for somebody else.

God finds a way. God will not be thwarted. God shall enter into our lives to be present, with us. As love made flesh. I've shared the details of my stories, that you might consider your own stories. Because oft' times it's in the details that we discover the sacred and experience the love of God. A rainbow with a promise. Offspring seen in the stars. A bush burning bright. A morsel of manna in a barren season.

One bright moment may awaken us. Two bright moments create a line to set our face in a new direction. Three, we begin to wonder about patterns in our lives, and the presence of the sacred, the movement of the Spirit. Looking back through the millennia we see the composed narrative of the birth of Christ. The view from the ground that night was likely less clear.

Life in Judea in those days was hard. Those at the top had great wealth; everyone else struggled simply to survive; many did not. Only through stories told by the elders could anyone fathom a time without the Roman occupation—with its laws to benefit those in faraway places but oppressive here on the ground. To ensure that every taxable nickel was extracted, the governor called for a headcount, a census. Most had to pack up their household, return to their birthplace to be counted; now displaced, criss-crossing the land.

Mary and Joseph were no doubt preoccupied with insistent physical needs: the growing urgency of labor pains and a place to rest drowned out the worry they bore—of family and neighbor's projected shame of mistimed pregnancy, and lingering palpitations in their hearts from the visitation of holy messengers. Now, it was the throbbing, mounting need of a baby wanting to be born.

Of mangers and stables, picture a late night truck stop on a desolate stretch of highway. The adjoining motel has sold out all the rooms—not that you had money enough anyway. But the poor fellow on duty that night, a mechanic with a strong accent, good heart, and hands no amount of scrubbing will cleanse of the daily grease, opens one of the bays in the garage. He points out a couple of stiff canvas tarps in the corner, the best he can offer by way of a bed.

Shepherds, you know, were a pretty rough lot. Most spent weeks on end out on their own, in the elements, with only their flock. To survive they forged their own way. Alert for predators and thieves, they grew strong, weathered. Shepherds had something of a code of ethics, but their ways were coarse, they weren't much for polite conversation. So their arrival that night, clamoring gleefully about angels in the night sky, was about as welcome as a couple of bikers roaring into the truck stop. They were eager enough, but one never knows.

And the birth itself. For those of us who've been witness, never mind born the sweat and pressure, the pain of labor. Holy it is, that's for sure. But gentle and pastoral, not so much. It's very much a sweaty animal affair—which we now know to be harbinger of the coming of the love and power of God. An infant born; the Messiah, God-with-us. In a stable, a garage, to a frightened couple far from home, in the company of strangers.

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The power is in the details; that the love of God enters into sweat, grit and worry of our daily lives. The miracle of this birth assures us there is nowhere God will not go to reach us. Assures us that this world, our flesh, is shot through with holiness. Assures us that God is with us now and always – right in the midst of whatever we’re facing in our lives.

Many online Biblical commentaries for Christmas Eve note that this year is harder than most—that events in our nation and around the globe feel particularly challenging. But I checked, and that’s what they said last year, too, and the year before that. Maybe it is harder each year at this time – because so much hangs in the balance for us—as individuals and as a people. Because we sense the potency of this moment. The very world itself is pregnant, groaning in travail. Because this year, just as last year and the one before, we ache for love, we are starved for peace, for the presence of God within us, among us, around us. Sings the poet of the newborn Christ, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

We come to this night brimful with our own hopes and fears, the hopes and fears that are fresh and potent, as well as those ancient inexorable within us. Some of us grateful, joyful; others grieving loved ones who have died. Some come with inner peace, some come with inner conflict. We come to Christmas with memories that make our spirits soar, and memories that make us want to cry, and a country more divided than it has been in many years. But Jesus was born into a world without peace, so as to bring peace. In a world such as ours with twenty-three million refugees, Jesus comes to us as a refugee.

God comes as a vulnerable baby, to be with us not just when we have it all together, not just when there’s peace on earth. The good news of Christmas is that God wants to be part of it all.

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. This is where God’s love is born anew, right here; in your house, in your heart, in your life, through your love and your light, shining bright this night.

Merry Christmas to you and to all. Amen.

How the Light Comes: A Blessing for Christmas Day

Jan Richardson

I cannot tell you
how the light comes.
What I know
is that it is more ancient
than imagining.
That it travels
across an astounding expanse
to reach us.

That it loves
searching out
what is hidden
what is lost
what is forgotten
or in peril
or in pain.

That it has a fondness
for the body
for finding its way
toward flesh
for tracing the edges
of form
for shining forth
through the eye,
the hand,
the heart.

I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.
That it will.
That it works its way
into the deepest dark
that enfolds you,
though it may seem
long ages in coming
or arrive in a shape
you did not foresee.

And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward it.
May we lift our faces
to let it find us.
May we bend our bodies
to follow the arc it makes.
May we open
and open more
and open still
to the blessed light
that comes.