



For All the People

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2017

The Nativity of Our Lord, Luke 2:1-20

So what do we all have in common? Here we are, on Christmas Eve, and I'm guessing we have nearly as many reasons for being here as there are people in the room. Some of us are here because we always go to church and, especially today, we wouldn't dream of being anywhere else. We love the joy and the opportunity to celebrate the birth of Christ and the community that has existed now for 2000 years because of him. Some of us perhaps don't come to church most of the year but we like an occasional dip into religious life, especially at the most beautiful seasons of the Church, at Christmas and at Easter too. I've been there. Some of us are here even though we never go to church, but our relatives have dragged us here and our goal is to surreptitiously surf Instagram or Facebook on our phones until the service is over. If that's you--it's OK. I've been there too. So what's true for all of us, really?

Like the old saying goes, the only thing you can count on is death and taxes. Well that's a pretty bleak thing to say on such a celebratory occasion. But we know we're all on a journey that will end at one point or another, none of us knows when, and each one of us is also subject to the power of the empire, whether the empire taxes us or is benevolent or cruel or indifferent. No matter whether we enjoy prosperity and acceptance or whether the deck was stacked against us before we were even born—we live here, in the United States, and whatever happens on the national scene impacts every one of us, in different ways. The scriptures for today also talk about everyone in the whole world being subject to a census under the Roman Empire in order to be taxed--everyone, rich and poor, whatever the nationality or location or anything else. And in the middle of this story, a truly strange thing happens.

What happens is that on a rural field at night in the backwater of Israel, which is itself a backwater of the Roman Empire, shepherds are watching their sheep—and suddenly, messengers of God come and tell another kind of story, a story that on its terms also affects everyone in the world without distinction. It's not a story about the crushing power of empire that impacts everyone no matter where or who you are. It's a story about an entirely different kind of power, which is God's extravagant favor toward humankind, a favor that implies peace for all people. It's a story about a Savior—which originally meant Healer, Rescuer, Deliverer. So, to these shepherds, these nobodies that were the equivalent of today's migrant farmers or overnight janitors, messengers from God proclaimed that God was sending healing, saving, rescuing, in the impossible form of a baby, and that this healing was intended for all the people.

So one bookend of the Christmas story is about the impossible crushing weight of the Roman Empire, that affected all people without distinction and that could force a woman who was nine months pregnant to walk eighty miles in order to register to her colonial oppressors so they could tax her. And the other bookend of today's story is about the strange proclamation of angels to nobody shepherds, which says that there is cause for ferocious joy to everyone without distinction, because God is here to heal us, God is here to help us, God is here to save us – again, all of us. All the people.

And how does that healing happen? Most of us who are even interested in God in the first place think that we have to seek and find God. If there is any peace to be had, any sense of spiritual wholeness or meaning or rightness in the world, it will happen because we work on ourselves and do our best and make efforts to be worthy of the favor of God. Now I'm not saying it isn't good to do all those things. But the meaning of Christmas is exactly the opposite of all that efforting. The meaning of Christmas is that we don't find God—instead, God comes to us, exactly as we are, without fanfare and even though we are not ready or prepared or particularly successful or good. God comes to us even though we are just doing our everyday life, like the shepherds were, even though like Mary and Joseph we continue to be impacted by the demands of the empire, of whatever is coming out of Washington or Moscow or Pyongyang or St. Paul. God comes to us as we are, even and especially when we are not fitting in, when we can't find any space for us, when we are like the shepherds who take the jobs no one else wants.

And this is the shocking part. Not only does God come to us, instead of making us find God. But WHEN God comes to us, God does not immediately make demands about changing our lives. God is just with us. God just declares joy, universal joy, and a source of peace for all the people. God didn't send the angels to Mary and Joseph and the shepherds to say, guess what? There's a Savior, so you'd better clean up, make sure you quit grazing your sheep on someone else's pasture, and then when you are good and ready go find the Savior. No, the angels just start celebrating. God has arrived in the form of a helpless baby, not to judge us or fix us but to join in solidarity with us as we are, whether we're feeling pretty good about life or whether we're on Prozac or spending a little too much time on things that aren't good for us. And God's unconditional presence with us is itself healing, and the beginning of peace.

So this is the other thing I'd say we all have in common, no matter who you are or where you have been or what you have done or what your future looks like at the moment. We need the companionship of those who see us truly, as is, and not as if, and yet can love us and heal us into transformation of life. Most of us think God is exactly the opposite: that God is a slightly strict and disappointed parent who is constantly telling us what to do. But Christmas reminds us that God comes to us in the opposite guise: not as a disapproving parent, but as a baby, a baby who can't possibly be successful or demanding or judgmental. God just comes to us, declaring the power of God's favor, God's love.

This is why we are here today, celebrating ferociously. This is why we keep meeting. Tonight we are singing silent night, holy night, and it isn't just to remember that beautiful night so long ago – it's to get quiet enough to recognize that this very same God is quietly with us here tonight, already for us, as we actually are today. This is why not just one angel but a countless throng of them had a flash mob of singing over news that was so good, and so counter to the power of empire, that nothing could contain it. What you have in common with me, and everyone here, and everyone else, is that God is with us, and God is for us, and there is nothing we can do to change that.