
For Unto You

Luke 2:1-20

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 25, 2016,
by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

I recently had a conversation with a friend about Christmas traditions. This year, her family encountered a bit of a family dilemma. You see, Christmas this year is, almost stubbornly it seems, on a Sunday. You all know this fact because you are here at the Chapel, on Sunday: Christmas Day. On the Chapel's website, it says we are open every day of the year except one: Christmas Day. But this year, Christmas is on a Sunday, and because we worship on Sundays, we are here. After some conversation, my friend and her family put it to a vote about whether to attend their local church today. When the tide of the vote seemed to be moving toward attending church, one family member piped up and said, "But Christmas is not about church. Christmas is about being with family."

Maybe you agree today. You would be in good company. This week WRAL reported on a 2013 study by the Pew Research Center that found 81% of non-Christian people celebrate Christmas in one way or another— as a cultural rather than a religious holiday—a time to celebrate with family and friends. And though a large percentage of the people surveyed, about 65%, said they believe at least parts of the Christmas story are true, only about half of the people who consider Christmas to be a religious holiday celebrate by attending a religious service on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.¹ So my friend's family member is in good company when she says, Christmas is about being with family.

But I'm not so sure that Luke's story of Jesus' birth—and Christmas as the day remembering that story—are about focusing on the family, at least not in any traditional sense. Yet, neither is Luke's a story or Christmas a day primarily about going to church. If Christmas is not about your family and friends, and if it is not about being in church, what is Christmas all about? Let's pay attention together this morning to the all too familiar details of Luke's story to hear afresh what is proclaimed unto you and me on this Christmas day.

Luke tells us the ruling Roman overlord, Caesar Augustus has summoned his powers over the peoples of the world, calling all people to an accounting for taxation purposes. Rome, the world power, and Caesar Augustus, as the Lord of Rome, seemed in every way to rule the world apart from the interests of God and God's people. Luke sets the stage for God to enact a global and political drama on the grandest scale imaginable by telling us the world power has summoned the peoples of the world to action. And a small family from the house and lineage of David—that is God's covenant people—enters this grand, global stage journeying from the backwater town of Nazareth, that place from which no one expected anything good to come. Maybe you know town's like Nazareth. Maybe you're from a place like Nazareth, and you like to tell stories of how you've come from the no-named-town in the middle of nowhere from which no one expected anything good to come, so you can understand what it means to be from nowhere but unexpectedly be on center stage like Joseph and Mary's family. This is a global drama focused on a family on a journey commanded by the occupying Roman authorities' decree. This family, an expectant mother and her fiancé, find no guest rooms with ample space. Rather they find overcrowded spaces, where the only extra room was near the animals' entry in the lowest part of the home—the stable area.

With the world power making decrees and all creation—represented by the animals at their feeding place—attuned to the small family, the stage of God's grand drama is ready. And on this stage, the miracle of birth happens. Luke deploys

¹ <http://www.wral.com/is-christmas-still-a-religious-holiday-/16363051/>

a euphemistic turn of phrase, “the time came for her to deliver her child” or as the King James says, “the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.” (I would say this surely shows that Luke never experienced the trauma and pain of child birth himself, but that’s beside the point.) Mary’s family grows by one during their trip to Bethlehem. The lens of the story zooms its focus from the global, to the familial, to a particular woman giving birth to her child. And there all heaven and earth, all creatures and all humanity, pause before the peasant child wrapped in bands of cloth in a feeding trough. Of course, because we’ve been preparing for this story through the season of Advent, and Luke has been preparing his readers by sharing stories of visits by God’s messengers, we know that this child is the promised child—the Son of the Most High God, the Holy Spirit’s child. But the surprise of the story is that God comes to dwell, to take on flesh, in this particular infant. This particular child—born with no place to be, who will spend his early years as a political refugee, and who will live most of his life as a wandering homeless man—is Immanuel, God come to be with us.

If Luke was not clear that God’s promises to Mary were fulfilled in the birth of her son, the Gospel writer tells more of the story. Near to Bethlehem, on the fringes of town and society, lived and worked the shepherds—those men who had the less-than-glamorous occupation and life of tending to and protecting the animals so significant for the sacrificial practices of the people of Israel. These peasants who physically occupied the margins, the nearby regions of the town, were working their nightshift when an angel of the Lord interrupted the night. These shepherds, the lowly outsiders that they are, were the first to receive the heavenly birth announcement. This is a sure sign that what God was doing in Christ’s birth is much grander than any family affair. The light of God’s glory flooded the night. The shepherds’ response was terror, absolute fear. And fear seems like a reasonable response to light consuming the total darkness of night. Fear, as we all know, can be inspired by God’s power in the heavens as well as by the evils of people on earth. And not knowing who or what caused such a light and whether the blinding light was meant for good or for ill, most understandably inspired fear.

Yet, God’s messenger meets the shepherds’ fear with a proclamation of good news: today light and life replace darkness and death; great joy outshines great fear for all people; the good news of God for all supplants the claims of Emperor Augustus—or any other threatening power—over all. For unto you is born this day a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. And this Anointed one who has come to you has come as a child, wrapped in bands of cloth, lying where the cattle feed. And with this proclamation, God’s angelic entourage shows up. The lowly and insignificant—a child in a trough—evokes the celebration, praise, and glory of the angels to God. The holy breaks into the ordinary, the public, the profane, the marginal, the places of low estate; the holy breaks right into the mundane sheep-keeping in the middle of the night, and God is worshiped and glorified and praised.

Can’t you see: Christmas is about so much more than family and friends. Christmas is about so much more than attending church or a service. Christmas is about all heaven and earth, all time and space, all people and all creation being changed forever by God’s act which the angels proclaimed: For unto you. Today. A Savior. Immanuel. God is with us. Christmas is about God’s gracious act of cosmic redemption through this child, God-made-flesh to be with us forever. This is the good news of Christmas. As Linus says, “That is what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.”

Yet, the Gospel writer does not leave the story there. The angels have proclaimed peace and good news where terror and fear had ruled the night. And then they departed. We are left only for the shortest time—1/2 of a scripture verse—to wonder what kind of response this angelic proclamation might prompt. I wonder if the half verse of scripture represents seconds or minutes or hours. I wonder if there was a discussion among the shepherds—maybe one where the shepherds’ fears threatened to crowd out the great joy and peace. Fear as we know has a way of sinking its teeth right back in and trying to reclaim a stronghold on those who have been set free from fear. However quickly it happened, once the shepherds decided on their course of action, they hurried to verify the sign given to them. And when they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger, they started spreading the message of joy and peace, the message that God’s redemptive action into history with God’s people for the sake of all the world had come to its fulfillment in the child wrapped in bands of cloth. Like the angel proclaimers, the shepherds become the evangelists to

those around them. The shepherds share the good news of joy and peace; they share of God's savior—the one the Spirit anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to declare that God's time of abundant mercy had arrived.

The angelic proclamation evoked the response of the shepherds' journey. And the shepherds' testimony similarly elicited a response. Luke tells us that the many who heard the report received it with amazement. They wondered at what they were told. This seems to be the initial response of those not yet convinced but whose interest has been piqued. The crowd who wonders at the shepherds' testimony is not yet ready to make the journey to find the child or to begin declaring with the angels God's glory and praise. As one commentator puts it, "[A]mazement' is not tantamount to faith and is no guarantee that a correct understanding of the extraordinary has or will be reached."² Nevertheless, the crowd has listened and wondered.

Luke then reports of another type of response to the shepherds' witness. "But Mary," Luke writes, "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Mary held these words close; she kept them safe; she cherished them; these words were like treasure to her. And they were added to God's revelation in her life. They became part of her deeper reflection on God's work, seeking to gain understanding. Mary demonstrated the posture of faith seeking understanding. The one who had already faithfully carried God in her womb continued to gather the treasures of God's revelation, so she might more fully understand.

The angels' proclamation stretches across the ages and has become a word for us today as we remember and celebrate Jesus' birth this Christmas day. For unto you. Today. A savior. This message of good news and great joy for everyone is a message that prompts a response even today. So, I wonder where you find yourself in God's Christmas story. Maybe you identify with the angels, who in a world of terror and fear insist on proclaiming to the lowly and marginalized that God's good news triumphs over fear even today.

Maybe you're like that heavenly host, eager to praise God in the highest heavens. You might just be like the young child who yesterday, much to her mother's horror, decided she too must join the angelic chorus of praise for the baby Jesus. Seeing the angels walk down the aisle at the children's service, she hopped out of her seat, and followed in line, with her mother trailing behind her trying at first to coax her back out of the chancel to return to her seat before then being filled with awe at the sight of her daughter claiming her spot among the heavenly chorus. Maybe this morning you want to shout and sing, glory to God, Glory to God, Glory to God in the highest. Let me encourage you to let your souls sing out God's glorious praises today. Join the heavenly host. Sing with all of who you are.

Potentially you find yourself in another place today, standing with the crowd who listens in amazement, not sure what to do with the story of God's good work in the world. Maybe you have not yet come to faith, but you are intrigued. You marvel at the idea that God became human, and that God becoming human shows the extent of God's love for us. You are even amazed that fear, darkness, violence and death, can be in Jesus overcome by joy and light and peace and life. Yet on this journey, you're not yet ready to claim faith in Immanuel—God with us. Let me encourage you today to keep listening, keep paying attention to those proclaiming Jesus, and continue seeking those places where God and God's action in the world stir amazement in you. Faith may not be far behind. You may just come to believe in this Savior.

² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 138.

Still others of you, may find yourself with Mary. Something has been born in you. There is light and life anew in your heart and mind and soul. So, you are gathering treasured information of God's surprising work in the world and reflecting on it in the light of Christ's life in you. Maybe even with all that has grown in you, you find yourself asking deep questions, wrestling with and pondering matters of life and faith. Let me encourage you this morning, you are in good company with Mother Mary. You are standing in line with theologians throughout the ages—those whose faith is constantly seeking understanding. Continue to treasure God's revelation in your heart. Ponder it in your mind. And by the Spirit, seek understanding.

Maybe you stand with the shepherds. You know that your fear has been replaced with joy, and you can't help but share it. Perhaps you've been surprised that the good news of Christ came to someone like you—someone with your history, someone with your faults, someone with your experience at the margins. You confirmed the signs proclaimed to you, and you know that Jesus has given you new life. And now you need to share the good news and testify to the truth that has come alive in you. Let me encourage you to be evangelists today. Take the story of Jesus that is for all people far and wide. Take it beyond the church and beyond your family, and share it with those who like you know the night and need the light.

Whether you've come today on the losing side of a family decision or you've come like the child who ran to join the angels, whether you find yourself in amazement or pondering this story in your heart, whether you're ready to confirm what has been told to you or share it with the world, know this: Unto you, unto us all, a child has been born; the one, who is God's salvation for the whole world, has come. Glory to God and Merry Christmas. Amen