

Sermon Series: The Advent of the Messiah
Sermon III: “The Christmas Story According to Luke”
Text: Luke 1:46-55; Luke 2:1-20
The Reverend Christopher A. Henry
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, GA
December 21, 2008

To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.
Luke 1:11

I read the story this week of a woman who waited until the last minute to buy Christmas cards to send to family and friends. Just days before the holiday, she rushed into a store, bought a package of fifty cards without reading the sentiments inside, hurried home, signed and addressed them and sent forty-nine on their way. On Christmas Eve, she finally read the message that she had sent to forty-nine persons. Much to her dismay the card read, “This card is just to say – A little gift is on its way.”

We can all be forgiven if we feel a little like that on this Fourth Sunday of Advent. After all, it is the 21st of December. The season of good tidings and overwhelming busyness has been upon us now for three full weeks. And all that has not yet been done must be done in the next three days. I think I can see some of you writing to-do lists on the back of your bulletins as I speak. It’s okay; I understand.

I must admit, however, that I have been concerned in this final week before Christmas about missing it. About watching the days fly by until the calendar reads December 26th without having truly celebrated.

Throughout the season of Advent, we here at Morningside have been spending some time with each gospel’s account of the Christmas story in an effort to lift up the unique voice of each.

This morning, we come to the gospel of Luke, perhaps the most well known of all the nativity stories. For it is Luke who tells of the shepherds who, while keeping watch over their flocks by night, are greeted by an angelic chorus lighting up the night sky with glad tidings of great joy. Luke’s story delivers Hallmark moments and heartwarming scenes that even the least religious in our culture could recount.

There is just something so celebratory about Luke’s Christmas story. All the joy and peace and hope—it’s almost more than the heart can contain. And it is exactly what so many of us need this year. This year above all years. I distinctly remember Joanna standing in this pulpit on Easter Sunday, nine months ago, and proclaiming how fortunate we were that Easter had come early in 2008. With all the bad news and grim outlook, all the division and unpleasantness that surrounded us, it was such a gift to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord a little sooner than usual. Well, in the nine months that have passed, so much has gone from bad to worse. From the environment to the economy,

from Baghdad to the Botanical Gardens. These are truly troubled times, times when one is almost afraid to open the newspaper or turn on the evening news. We find ourselves again in need of some sign of hope beyond the power of human ingenuity. Luke's story of the birth of Christ is in so many ways a cure for what ails us.

It is, of course the story of Mary. Just as Joseph is the hero of the story in Matthew, so Mary is the central character around which Luke's account is built. It begins with the appearance of the angel Gabriel, who gives Mary the shocking news that she will give birth to a child who will be called the Son of the Most High.

It continues with her stunning hymn of praise, the Magnificat, in which she describes God as the one who lifts the lowly up and fills the hungry with good things. Mary's song is a preview of the life that her son will lead. It is no lullaby, but rather a song of defiant faith. For through Mary, God's purposes for suffering Israel shall be accomplished. Mary breaks into song at the thought of giving birth to the Messiah, and her song's message is quite clear. God is on the move. This is the message of Advent. That the God of the universe is coming into the world to dwell with and liberate humanity. Mary sings of a God who keeps promises, a God who is incapable of remaining distant from the created world. Mary is the first preacher of the Gospel because she is the first one to receive and deliver the terrifying and hopeful message that the world is about to turn.

But something interesting happens when we turn from the beautiful soaring poetic prophetic words of the Magnificat to the second chapter of Luke's Gospel. Did you notice it? In just a few verses, we find ourselves transported back from God's heavenly kingdom of righteousness and truth to the world as it is. Luke does it with these few words: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." Just that quickly, the spotlight shifts from Mary in joyful song to Caesar, whose simple decree puts the whole world on the move. As Walter Brueggemann has written, "the birth (of the Christ child) is scheduled according to the emperor: a decree went out that all should be numbered."¹

Mary has been told about the day when the powerful will be brought down from their thrones, but she lives in a day when the throne is quite secure. Caesar Augustus ruled with absolute power and his subjects were compelled to call him Lord and Savior. Luke knows that the Christmas story is set against a backdrop of Imperial Rule and subjugation. Even though Mary was carrying the true savior of the world, she must obey the command of the Emperor and travel with her betrothed to Bethlehem, his ancestral home.

When Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem they discover that there are no guest rooms available, the city so filled with foreigners. As a concession, they are given a little space in the stable out back. It is there, in the discomfort of a feeding trough and the unfamiliarity of a distant city that the savior of the world is born.

It is easy for us, these two thousand Christmases later, to imagine that the stable was the center of attention for all of Bethlehem, if not the entire world. But this is not the way that Luke tells the story. The city of Bethlehem was full of people, but they had come to their

ancestral home to be counted in the census and pay their taxes. You can sense the chaos and overcrowding as the story is told.

Ted Loder tells this story from the perspective of the Innkeeper who realizes that there is great profit to be made by the decree that went out from Caesar Augustus. All those travelers would need a place to eat and stay, after all and so the Innkeeper sings out these words:

*Trade at the Inn's never been this good.
So, quickly run out and fetch some more wood.
Yet feed the fire carefully and slow as your able.
Our profits will soar if we keep our costs stable.
Just think what we'll do with the money we'll take.
A killing! Praise Caesar! What a killing we'll make!*

As the story progresses, a young couple, the woman clearly close to giving birth, arrives and are pushed to the stable out back. There the woman gives birth to a son, shepherds arrive to share the glorious news and angels sing outside, but the Innkeeper keeps busy inside making sure that more and more guests are fed and rooms are filled, until finally all the guests are in bed and the inn is cleaned for the night.

When his family shares with him the wondrous events of the night, he speaks words that haunt me this time of year, words that might be spoken by any of us after the gifts have been unwrapped and the dinner has been eaten and the guests have all departed:

*I never went. Spontaneity seemed an extravagance.
I had my lists.
What difference does one baby make, more or less?
There are bills to pay;
There is this rare chance, a killing to make – perhaps for me.
Three hundred steps across the yard
From here to where they were.
I watched a time or two.
I hushed the men who yelled in the yard.
They left their job tending flocks; I stayed at mine.ⁱⁱ*

When Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, nearly everyone missed it. Too busy with all that they had to do. Too distracted by the news of Caesar's census. Too pre-occupied to duck into an alleyway and step through the mud to see the face of the child. Only some dusty shepherds who were the recipients of a divine message made the trip.

And yet, the birth of Jesus Christ in a manger in Bethlehem tells us everything that we need to know about the God whom we worship and serve. This is a God who chooses to come to us, to live where we live, to be born not in a grand palace but in the ordinariness of a stable. God with us. Emmanuel. As one preacher has said it, "Luke paints the whole picture in this small scene. God's Son, vulnerable as every infant is vulnerable, subject to all the conditions under which we all live, fully identified with every human being's need

for love, lies here unnoticed, without trumpet or drum roll and without a place to lay his head.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In the Christmas story according to Luke, the place to look is not at the glorious heavenly host, but the shepherds who hear their words. We are drawn not to the angelic figure of Gabriel but to the determined face of Mary. The God we worship is not found in royal robes but in bands of cloth, not rocked to sleep in a golden chair but resting on a straw-filled manger. For Luke, the joy of Christ’s birth is that it transforms the ordinary into the miraculous. Christmas comes to all the world, regardless of human-made distinctions and barriers. The story of Christmas lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things. Christmas belongs to all of creation—you just need to know where to look.

There will be much competing for our attention and our concern this week. In addition to our own endless to-do lists, the world seems to be collapsing all around us. Economic hardship, endless violence, an uncertain future. A cartoon I saw last week showed an advertisement for the “All-Crisis Network”, with a program lineup that included “The World in Crisis,” “Religion in Crisis,” “The Crisis in Our Schools,” “The Health-Care Crisis,” and “Washington in Crisis.”^{iv} It would be easy to make the decision not to celebrate. To bury ourselves in anxiety and fear and just go through the motions until the holiday season has passed. Check the boxes on our lists and just get through it grudgingly. We could be like those who gathered in Bethlehem to be enrolled or like the innkeeper who missed the joy of God’s love though it was right in front of him.

Or we could join the shepherds who returned to their fields glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard. We could sit with Mary who quietly pondered the significance of this miraculous birth. We could celebrate, truly celebrate, with joy and delight and awe and wonder. We could reach out and embrace one another, care for one another, love one another.

We can choose joy over despair this Christmas.

For unto us a child is born.

Don’t miss it. For God’s sake, don’t miss it.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Prayers for a Privileged People*, Abingdon Press, 2008, p. 37.

ⁱⁱ Ted Loder, *Tracks in the Straw: Tales Spun from the Manger*, Innisfree Press, 1997, pp. 84-95.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1991, p. 31.

^{iv} *The New Yorker*, 12-15-08, p. 59.