



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
Dec. 24, 2023
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Christmas Eve Homily

Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

2:2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

2:3 All went to their own towns to be registered.

2:4 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.

2:5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

2:6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

2:7 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.

2:8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

2:9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

2:10 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:

2:11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

2:12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

2:13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

2:14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

2:15 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."

2:16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

2:17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;

2:18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

2:19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

2:20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Homily

I'm good friends with the music director of a large church in the Pittsburg area. He texted me this week, asking if I was nervous about my first Christmas Eve sermon at my new call here at Westminster. I told him no, because (and I'll quote myself here), I told him, "I don't think anyone ever pays attention to the sermon on Christmas Eve." I've been attending church all my life. I've worked in churches most of my adult life. I've been a pastor on staff at large churches for the last 7 years. Thinking back this week, I can only remember one Christmas Eve sermon, and that one I remember only because it was a particularly bad sermon. Christmas Eve, after all, is packed with the grandeur, the community, the anticipation - beautiful music, decorated sanctuaries, full pews, excited children, exhausted adults. No one pays attention to the sermon, and that suits me, the preacher just fine. My friend, the music director, congratulated me for knowing my place, on Christmas Eve.

Of course, any church service is just a bare approximation of the pronouncement we read about in Luke:

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 suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven.”

The contrast here is intentional: angelic heralds do not come to the halls of powers. Luke tells us it is the time of Emperor Augustus and Governor Quirinius, but they are kept in the dark, for as we read last week in Isaiah: The Lord brings good news to the poor and binds up the brokenhearted – in this case, lowly shepherds in the fields. What a pronouncement it must have been!

What we do here is simply an imitation.

“Hark the Herald Angels Sing” - We repeat their chorus and read their pronouncement:

“This will be a sign for you,” says the angel to the shepherds, “you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

Notice, the sign is simply the child himself. Beyond that, they don’t foretell anything particularly resplendent about his birth. If anything, the birth is marked less by its glory and more by its humility – a poor child, a displaced family, surrounded not by angels but by a manger. The glory of the Lord shines in the field but not the manger.

This is why contemporary retellings of the nativity emphasize its lowliness. Many of you will be able to call to mind a drawing that went viral years ago, termed “Maria y Jose,” depicting a modern-day Latino Joseph and Mary, clearly indigent and desperate, caught in a downpour in front of a convince store window, Jose at a payphone, a very pregnant Maria resting nearby upon a broken children’s horse ride.¹ Or, more recently, perhaps you saw a photo posted a few weeks ago of the outdoor creche at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, in the West

¹ See Alyson Rockhold, “The Story Behind the Viral ‘José y María.’” *Common Good*. Aug. 26, 2022. <https://commongoodmag.com/the-story-behind-the-viral-jose-y-maria/>

Bank.² It depicts the Christ child not in a manger, but cradled in broken concrete; it's Jesus as a child of Gaza. These images, though contemporary, are also deeply Biblical, because Luke's point is that Christ's birth happens not in the center but in the margin, off the side, in a forgotten place.

As the Catholic social activist Dorothy Day once put it, "If Mary had appeared in Bethlehem clothed...with the sun, a crown of twelve stars on her head, and the moon under her feet, then people would have fought to make room for her." It was the lowliness, the ordinariness, the humility of the Holy family that the angels foretold. If you didn't know what you were looking for, you would have looked right past them, looked right past the birth of God with us, Emmanuel.

Every Christmas Eve, I get a poem stuck in my head by Thomas Hardy, a residual effect of having been an English major some two decades ago. Perhaps you know it. Thomas Hardy wrote brooding, depressing novels, but it's the sweetest poem, simply called "The Oxen."³ It's based around an old English superstition, that at midnight, on Christmas eve, in farmhouses everywhere, the animals would kneel, in honor of the Christ child.

Hardy was a skeptic of the faith. One would imagine, he would think such a superstition to be silly, but the point of the poem, actually is, how sometimes, on Christmas eve, he would wish it to be true:

In the first two stanzas, Hardy remembers hearing and believing the story about the Oxen kneeling when he was a child:

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
 "Now they are all on their knees,"
 An elder said as we sat in a flock
 By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
 They dwelt in their strawy pen,

² See Laura King, "In Bethlehem, The Home of Jesus' Birth, a Season of Grieving for Palestinian Christians." *LA Times*. Dec. 19, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-12-19/scant-glad-tidings-this-christmas-for-palestinian-christians>

³ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53215/the-oxen-56d232503c32d>

Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

If the first stanzas are about his childhood, in the final parts of the poem, Hardy is an adult, thinking back. It's silly, he thinks. And yet, there's still a part of him that wants to believe. He imagines going out at midnight just to see if it might be true:

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
"Come; see the oxen kneel,

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

Now, I could nerd out with you for some time about why this is such a beautiful poem. The ways that Hardy combines sound and rhyme here, is absolutely masterful:

So fair a fancy few would weave
Yet,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
"Come;

But for our purposes tonight, I bring up the poem, because I've realized this week, I actually disagree with Hardy. Reading his poem beside the Gospel of Luke this week, I realized that Hardy is looking in the wrong place, for hope, for proof of the miracle in the manger.

I mean, it is a miraculous thing. "God with us" in the form of this baby, the savior born in a manger. But if you didn't know what you were looking for, you would have missed it, even if you saw it with your own eyes. The oxen do not kneel tonight, but neither did they kneel in Bethlehem. Luke wants to emphasize the ordinariness of Jesus's birth, its lowliness. The angels appear in the field but not in the manger.

That doesn't make it any less spectacular. It simply means you have to the eyes of faith to understand it: God with us, God with you, God with me. The whole point is that it's easy to miss, but that doesn't make it any less real.

It's just that, you have to know what you are looking for. Like the shepherds, and even like Mary, who heard it from Gabriel one chapter and several months earlier, you have to be told. The heavenly choir has to appear in the field, if you're going to make sense of what happens in the manger. Because God is with us. God comes to us. But it takes the eyes of faith to see it.

And when you don't have a heavenly choir of angels appearing in a field at night, then, you've got to come back to places like this, you've got to surround yourself, with a community like this, where generations have witnessed and proclaimed the faith, 'God with us.'

And even after going to that place, being with those people, or reading for yourself the promises in Scripture, you've still got to remember them, you've got to hold onto them. You've got to hold in your heart the people in your life who have told you that God is with us, that you are the beloved of God.

There's going to be a time in the coming weeks, the coming months, the coming year, when it will feel like God is far away. It's going to be a hard day, or a hard week, or perhaps more, just an ordinary day, that feels bleak, or lonely, or forsaken. I don't know what that is going to look like for you. Or for this community. Or for this nation. But those days come for us all. Maybe you're going through a time like that right now.

And on those days, especially, we are asked to remember the promise that God is born in our midst. The promise that the Divine chooses to dwell, not far away in heaven above, but right here: in time and space and flesh, God with us. But you need the eyes of faith to see it, because especially on the hard days, it's easy to miss.

So right now, look around. Take this all in. This moment, this place, this community, this time. It may not be a herald of angels but it is a pronouncement nonetheless: God is with us. Take that in and hold it. Because Christmas is not an ending. It is a beginning. We are called to ponder it in our hearts, the whole year long. We are called to remember that God with us, every day, and in every season.

It is good news of great joy for all the people. Amen.