

Christmas Eve Sermon

December 24, 2020

St. Paul's UCC Church

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Luke 2:1-16

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.

"In those days."

Not "once upon a time," not "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away," but "*in those days.*"

In those days, in those particular and peculiar days of Emperor Augustus and Governor Quirinius, in those days of the census, of the registration and the decree; in those days of harsh laws and the occupation. In *those* days, this story takes place.

And what were those days like? Well, honestly, they weren't too pretty. They weren't too great. Those days... those days were pretty dark.

Tonight we read from the Gospel according to Luke, where we hear about Mary, a young Jewish woman – just a girl, really, from the little town of Nazareth – a girl who has suddenly become pregnant. Do you know what could happen to a young woman, back in those days, who got pregnant out of wedlock? At best, she would be gossiped about, shunned, made to feel cheap and unworthy. At worst, she could be killed, murdered. Can you imagine? There were very real, very particular, consequences waiting for Mary because of her unplanned pregnancy. And those consequences were not pretty.

Luke's story stars a pregnant, unwed teenage mother named Mary. And it co-stars a man named Joseph, Joseph of Bethlehem. Joseph, who was a good Jew, a good man, a man who wants to do the right thing, but who is probably scared out of his wits. This story co-stars Joseph, who knows very well what could happen to Mary because of her... condition. And what could possibly happen to him, too.

This story, this "Christmas story" is made up of some pretty hard stuff back in those days: tax collection, bureaucracy run amuck, an occupying and oppressive empire. Unplanned pregnancy. Homelessness. Fear.

This story, this story we call the "Christmas Story," is made of real flesh and blood, real sweat and tears. This story isn't easy to tie up with a nice bow. There is darkness here, darkness back in "those days."

On previous Christmases – I would say pretty much every other one we've spent together, St. Paul's – on previous Christmases, it was kind of hard to imagine things being so hard for the holy family, back 2000 years ago. On previous Christmases, we would have all been gathered together in our beautiful sanctuary, a place that would have seemed like another world: a magical, mystical place, a candle-lit haven from all the troubles "out there."

But that was before. And this is now. And on this particular Christmas Eve, this 2020 Christmas, I don't think it's so hard to imagine such a troubled story. Because our

own story, especially this year, is troubled, too. Because of the global pandemic, we are not gathered together in our beautiful candle-lit sanctuary tonight. We are not singing our Christmas hymns together. We aren't hugging or high fiving or shaking hands. Even communion feels funky tonight.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. That's just tonight. Friends, I don't have to tell you that it's been a tough year for so many of us. Having to social distance and wear masks practically every time we leave the house. Not being able to socialize like we used to. Wondering and worrying about our employment. Having loved ones die, without being able to visit them, or without a proper funeral. 2020 has been a hard year, to say the least. So on this particular Christmas, this 2020 Christmas, it's not such a big leap to imagine things being so hard for the holy family two thousand years ago.

The people in the very first Christmas story, like us, are not having an easy time. They are confused and perplexed, anxious and afraid. They don't fully understand what has happened to them. And they have no idea how any of this is going to turn out.

But they do know something. Back then, back in those days, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the magi, the angels – they know that this child is the promise of God-with-us, Emmanuel. In this child, though it is hard, they are able to hear the whisper of Good News: that God does not stand at some safe distance from us. That God does not stay shut up inside some heaven, in a galaxy far, far away. In this child, God draws near, so near, born into a real world – a flesh and blood world, a sad and sick world – into the smelly straw of a Bethlehem stable, into Bethlehem's dark night.

And back in those days, just as God drew near to that holy family – in the stable, in the straw, in the fear, in the flesh, so God draws near to us – in the sickness, in the weariness. In the fear, in the flesh. God draws near to us this year, this terribly difficult year. God draws near to us right now. And just as God did back in those days, God whispers the Good News to us in the darkest corners of the night.

God is not "once upon a time" or "far, far away." God is here, now. Even as we are separated, God is right here with us. In our fears, in our tears, God is here with us. In our homes, on our screens, when we rise and when we sleep, God is here. In our

sickness and impatience, our hopes and our dreams, our joys and our sorrows, God is here, in the thick of it all, whispering the Good News.

Emmanuel. We are not alone. And Easter joy does come in the morning.

Thanks be to God.