

Luke 2:1-20

New Revised Standard Version

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. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

I love the hymn that we just sang. "In the Bleak Midwinter" is realistic and talks about both pain and darkness, but it is also hopeful. Yes, it is bleak outside, but God comes. It reminds us that there is always room for joy and hope. My favorite verse is the last one, "What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part; yet what I can I give him: I give my heart."

It makes me think of the true story about a church Christmas pageant.¹ The pageant took place in a small town somewhere here in the Midwest back in the early 1960s. The account was written up in a magazine shortly after it happened, and the story focused on a boy named Wallace Purling. Wallace, or Wally for short, really, really wanted to be a shepherd in the pageant. He loved everything involved with being a shepherd: hearing the angels, guarding the sheep, running to Bethlehem to see the new baby. The chance to be one of the shepherds had been Wally's dream for years, and all the children and adults who annually took part in the pageant knew it.

That particular year, Wally hoped it would finally be his turn to live his dream. However, as rehearsals geared up, Ms. Lumbard, the director, began to get very nervous about the idea of Wally as a shepherd. She knew that Wally sometimes had difficulty remembering things, and he could often be quite clumsy. If he forgot his lines or knocked things over when he arrived at the stable, the pageant's drama would be ruined, and no one wants anything ruined on Christmas Eve. So she came up with a different plan.

Instead of asking him to be a shepherd, she would ask Wally to be the innkeeper. That part had fewer lines and little movement. Wally could do that part well, she thought, and to his credit, he agreed. He would wait yet one more year to be a shepherd. This year he'd play the part of the innkeeper instead.

¹ retold by Michael Foss, pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville, Minnesota, in his sermon "Christmas Eve 1999," www.day1.org

Christmas Eve arrived, and it was finally show time at Wally's church. Wally stood right where he was supposed to stand behind the wooden door, waiting for Mary and Joseph's arrival. Mary and Joseph made their way to the door, and Joseph knocked on it. Wally, right on cue, opened the door and demanded, "What do you want?" Sitting on the front row, Ms. Lumbard felt a rush of confidence. He was playing the part of the cranky innkeeper just right.

"We seek lodging," Joseph said. Wally responded, "Seek it elsewhere. The inn is full." Joseph said, "But sir, we have asked everywhere in vain; we have traveled far and are very tired." Wally sternly said, "There is no room for you in this inn!" Joseph pleaded, "Please, good innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is pregnant and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. Please." And then, for the first time, Wally the innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance, looked down at Mary, and took a noticeable pause. Ms. Lumbard held her breath. Had he forgotten what he was supposed to say? "No, begone," she whispered from her seat, hoping to remind him. It worked. "No!" Wally responded. "Begone!"

And with that line, Joseph placed his arm around Mary, just as they had practiced, and Mary laid her head upon his shoulder. The two of them began to slowly move away, but Wally, who was supposed to close the door and exit the stage, did not move. He stood there, mouth open, brow creased, his eyes following Mary and Joseph as they slowly walked away. And then everyone in the congregation saw his eyes fill with tears. "Don't go, Joseph!" Wally cried out. "Bring Mary back!" And as the tears rolled down his cheeks, his face suddenly brightened with hope. "I know—you can have my room!"

If only that had been true on that day so long ago. If the innkeeper had said, "No wait. Take my room. My family will get you some warm towels and a pillow for your back, Mary." Jesus, God with us, was born into poverty, into plain ordinariness, in a stable, not in a room at the inn.

Christmas is a time of joy and hope when we celebrate the birth of the One who calls us to love and forgiveness, justice and compassion, hope and generosity. Tonight is a night for us to proclaim that no matter what is going on in our world, no matter if we are worshipping in the safety of our homes instead of inside this sanctuary, the Christ child still comes, the light still shines, and the darkness will never, never, never overcome it. The good news of Christmas is that God comes to us. I am weary this Christmas. You might have been too tired to decorate this year or too broke to think about gift-giving. Maybe you have been too grief-stricken to think about birth and too angry to think about joy.

At Christmas we celebrate that God is here, not in some remote place in the heavens. At Christmas we are reminded of God's love for each one of us and for creation. At Christmas we can stop and see God's ways when our own ways have blinded us. At Christmas we celebrate the new life that God stirs within us rekindling dreams of hope and peace and justice that are so easily doused by the harsh realities of this world. God offers us today grace to ease our heavy burdens, joy despite all the sadness, courage for the fears we harbor, and love to inspire all of our living. Hope is born on Christmas Day as we celebrate God with us.

Cindy Klymov from Greenland Hills said something wonderful on Facebook this week. She said, "Despite all the bad this year there were some good things, like families that live together got to spend more quality time together, houses and garages got cleaned out, saved mileage on your cars, people learned to cook or created some new meals, projects got started (and maybe some finished), parents got to experience what happens in school and maybe learned a few subjects, older people learned about Zoom or FaceTime and the internet and phone lines allowed us to stay connected at some level."

Christmas is an opportunity for us to see God through the disruption of the ordinary. This year has certainly disrupted the ordinary! So I ask you, where have you seen God in ordinary days and in ordinary places? The Bishop of the Greater Northwest Area, encompassing Alaska, Oregon, Idaho and the Pacific Northwest Annual Conferences, shared where she had seen God in ordinary days and in ordinary places. She said “Love lives where a grandma lays her sweater on the shoulders of a sleeping stranger on a chilly bus. Love lives where a caregiver holds a smartphone or tablet to connect a dying patient with a loved one. Love lives when a local church welcomes strangers, widows and orphans seeking safety. Love lives when people who are sorting out their sexuality and identity have a place at the table of faith. Love lives where Christians live their baptismal promise to ‘resist evil, injustice, & oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.’ Love lives when a passerby tapes a violent, racist atrocity on her phone for the world to witness. Love lives in the anguished cry for justice and love. Love lives when a church offers space for people evacuated from wildfires to store their belongings, or board their pets. Love lives when any of us find our hardened hearts open and ready to heal a broken relationship.”²

We celebrate tonight that love lives as a homeless couple, weary after a long day of travel, find rest in an animal shed. We celebrate tonight that this exhausted couple welcomed the untimely birth of their baby and laid him in a manger. We celebrate that a star shone in the night sky and a song spilled from heaven that a new and holy thing was happening. Shepherds and sojourners showed up in the night, after seeing, wondering, and following these signs of hope.³

Things have happened this year that we never thought possible. Tonight we celebrate that nothing is impossible with God because just as God was born in Jesus, God can dwell in us, too, as we grow to love as wondrously as God loves, as extravagantly as Jesus loves our neighbors, strangers, and those we think of as enemies.⁴

Tonight, may God open our eyes to watch for where love lives because God is here with us. Thanks be to God! Amen.

² <http://westernjurisdictionumc.org/seeking-to-be-gods-light-in-the-world/?fbclid=IwAR0u-cC4YBsB8nkW7WvWpyw8GGeZ0fnGSqSN2Yqg84M2Dj5VJV1x3j7YeFI>

³ <http://westernjurisdictionumc.org/seeking-to-be-gods-light-in-the-world/?fbclid=IwAR0u-cC4YBsB8nkW7WvWpyw8GGeZ0fnGSqSN2Yqg84M2Dj5VJV1x3j7YeFI>

⁴ <http://westernjurisdictionumc.org/seeking-to-be-gods-light-in-the-world/?fbclid=IwAR0u-cC4YBsB8nkW7WvWpyw8GGeZ0fnGSqSN2Yqg84M2Dj5VJV1x3j7YeFI>