

“Big Enough for God’s New Life”
Christmas Eve Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; December 24, 2019

Luke 2:1-20

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.

Howard Thurman, the African American mystic, poet and spiritual leader, [describes in verse](#) a mother observing her small child doing his bedtime prayer. She says,

“Each night my bonny, sturdy lad
Persists in adding to his, Now I lay me
Down to sleep, the earnest, wistful plea:
‘God make me big.’
And I, his mother, with a greater need,
Do echo in a humbled, contrite heart,
‘God make me big.’”

We might *all* pray for such bigness this year on behalf of children everywhere: bigness of vision, of stamina, of grace, and of courage.

One of my favorite words in the Christmas season is “Emmanuel”. It’s a name for God’s promised Messiah, first spoken by Hebrew prophets and then used as a title for Christ, the divine incarnation, God with skin on. “Emmanuel” is a compound word, joining together the Hebrew “Emanu” (“with us”) and “El”, one of the Hebrew names for God. When I think about Emmanuel and its meaning of, “God with us”, I tend to focus on the “with us” part of that phrase. I reflect on the mystery that God comes alongside us, sharing our common lot, divinity recognizable in human form. But this year, what I’m longing for is *God* with us. I yearn for the “El” or “Elohim” of Scripture, who speaks with righteous judgment, who comes with sufficient power to set the world right. I want the magnificence and unmistakable presence of divine new life breaking into the world like the story says. I long to be one of those shepherds in the field whose hair is blown back by angel multitudes singing with amps turned up to eleven: “Glory to God in the

highest heaven, and on earth peace....” The promise of God’s New Life; that’s what I long for more than anything else this year.

This supernatural interruption captures my imagination because the world without it can seem so small. Two decades into the twenty-first century, the world feels tired and used up. Humanity appears anything but humane, sometimes indifferent to suffering, and sometimes downright cruel. People wound each other with abusive language, deceitful behavior, and all manner of things unspeakable in the presence of children. Yet children not only hear but live through such mean conditions every day. Great patches of human garbage float in the oceans, and every week brings more alarming weather caused by climate change that we are not moving fast enough to stop. We’ve turned God’s beautiful creation into a landfill. “God with us”? It seems like it would slander God to be associated with this at all.

Yet still God comes as the child Christ—into *just* such a world as this. Jesus knew a culture of chaos as well, with corrupt Caesars, warlike violence, and future generations as collateral damage. One of the most awe-inspiring texts from ancient Christmas liturgies is a Latin phrase that begins “O magnum mysterium”. “O great mystery and wonderful sacrament, that animals should see the newborn Lord, lying in a manger!” It is creatures such as ourselves who behold the great God of new life, breaking into the world this Christmas night. We bear witness to a God whose redemptive power humbles the world, a God big enough, with enough creative patience, table-turning magic, and joy, to transform the swamps of our common life.

Entering into creation, God’s arrival brings “both a superabundance and an ache”, [according to preacher Matthew Fitzgerald](#). He also quotes the poet Richard Wilbur, who writes,

“Joy’s trick is to supply
Dry lips with what can cool and slake,
Leaving them dumbstruck also with an ache
Nothing can satisfy.”

In other words, Jesus both satisfies a thirst in us, and awakens insatiable hunger for a world worthy of his presence. That’s what we find in the manger on Christmas night. The joy of God come to earth with us even as broken as we are, and yet planting within us the seeds of Another Way, leaving us yearning for God’s divine life “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Our prayers and actions in response become that of the mother who sees the goodness of a child and the fragility of the world: “God make *us* big.” Big enough to care mercifully for the very young, the very old, and all those in between. Big enough to see no distinction in God’s eyes across borders, among strangers, or between enemies. Big enough to heal rifts within families or friendships, to prepare hospitality for guests of the season, those invited and those not. Big enough to feel all the feels—the wonder of music, awe at the everyday goodness of those doing right, and tears for the tragedy and beauty of it all. Big enough to hold a blessing for all this broken yet beloved creation.

This world *will* be made new, and our lives *will* be made new, by the power of God. God does not snap the equivalent of divine fingers and create anew, but enters in with Christ to transform the world, working with us here and now. So God make us big to live into the better angels of our nature, and to meet with grace all the moments before us in the year ahead, that God’s life might be recognized within tattered mangers everywhere. Amen.