

“Bringing You Good News”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Christmas Eve

Edina Morningside Community Church; December 24, 2020

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.

My favorite characters in the Christmas story are the shepherds. We don’t know their names, or who their families are, but we have some sense of how they lived. Shepherds did what we would probably classify now as blue-collar work, often paid meager wages to watch over a wealthier person’s sheep, traveling from pasture to pasture, staying with the animals 24/7 to keep them from danger. The shepherd’s work is solitary, though it’s in the company of others, a mostly anonymous profession marked by long stretches of boredom.

Shepherds still do this humble, vital work in many parts of the world, but we don’t see them much anymore in the United States. I started wondering what the equivalent is of shepherds in our own culture, and I’m persuaded by [the suggestion of others](#) that the corresponding workers now are long-haul, over-the-road truckers. They work unusual hours, often through the night, by themselves but as part of a loose network, and spend long stretches of time away from family. They have careful responsibility of that which is not theirs, but that they watch over on behalf of others. Like other workers now recognized as essential, truckers are often overlooked and taken for granted, yet modern society would not be possible without their long, dedicated hours in motion for others. In a unusual spotlight, we have seen many images over the last several weeks of loading docks, wheels on the pavement, and trucks in motion, bearing the precious vaccine cargo that is today’s medical good news.

In our current season of essential travel only and staying-at-home precautions, I’ve been noticing how much movement there is in the Christmas story. The emperor’s decree “went out”, and that starts it all from verse one. Then “all went to their own towns”, and Joseph “went” with greatly pregnant Mary. It’s about 85 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, just over an hour on the interstate for truckers today but days on the road for poor Mary and Joseph. Angels are on the move too with their own heavenly cargo,

“bringing you good news of great joy.” I imagine semi-trailers of encouragement, hope and relief arriving on the heavenly highways. Then it’s time for the shepherds to get in motion, “so they went with haste”, they share the news they’ve heard, and then they return again. The Christmas story happens on the road, and the good news arrives to (and through) those in motion.

We have romantic associations with travel sometimes, but being on the road by definition involves dis-location, which almost always also means dis-comfort. Remember journeys that you’ve been on, when you forget the toothbrush, clothes, or other essential items; you were around strangers and new routines, where the accommodations of home were hard to find in a new space. For Joseph and dear Mary, the displacement to Bethlehem involves far greater challenges. Mary gives birth without the attentive care of mother, aunties, sisters, or others who would normally accompany such a birth. Like those who are homeless and always journeying today, Joseph has no door to close, no way to provide privacy or protection for Mary. What does it mean that the tiny child Christ begins his journey in just this way—without proper shelter, vulnerable to the elements, and with the animals? Or that when he grows up, he will say, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20)?

Beloveds, we have not traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and most of us do not lead the road-weary lives of shepherds and truckers, but we have all been on a journey this year. It’s not about the surroundings—your home may be agonizingly familiar right now. We are on the life-defining, society-transforming journey between who we were before this pandemic outbreak, and who we will become through it, on the other side of this deadly winter. We are physically traveling less or not at all, but the disruption is everywhere. We have been displaced from all of our customary traditions, separated from family and friends when it means the most, and can’t even gather in a familiar sanctuary for worship on Christmas Eve. The prickly emotions characteristic of unwelcome travel—things like anxiety, overwhelm, fear and fatigue—are ever present. Our lives have been disrupted by forces beyond our control; the future is clouded by uneasy threats of disease and economic hardship; we may feel fatalism, dismay and despair. This is where we find ourselves in Christmas of 2020, sent out from all that was familiar before, but not yet arrived at a safe destination and vulnerable on the journey.

In just such times, into just such a world, to just such people now as then, God enters in. Your place on the road, wherever you are this night, though you may feel lost to yourself, is not lost to God. God is journeying tonight too—on the way to us, to where we are, to be born amidst our displacement, alienation and loneliness. The angels of prayer, carols and timeless story wing their way to every restless heart, “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.” God opens the nighttime of fearful isolation with news of light, life and joy. God comes to us, entering into humanity as Jesus, and entering into every uncertain moment of our lives now. God will meet us in *every* journey of our lives, including now, because the child born this night is Emmanuel, “God *with us*”. I promise you, [in the words of Lutheran Bishop Elizabeth Eaton](#), that “There is no God-forsaken place and we are never alone—not in hospital rooms, or sheltering in place, or [in] Zoom calls or on dangerous roads.”

At the end of the Christmas story, the shepherds are on the move again, “glorifying and praising God”. Their circumstances had not changed, and yet the sight of God-with-us sends them out, carrying joy to all the world no matter how long the journey would last. Will we be like them too? “Joy to the world! The Lord is come...let every heart prepare Christ room.” Amen.