

## “TO YOU”

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2016 ~ Christmas Eve, 10pm

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The actual event cannot have been as the classic carol, *Silent Night* pictures it.

We have a children’s book that tells the story from the perspective of the innkeeper. First late arrivals, Mary and Joseph, interrupt his sleep in search of shelter. After settling them in the stable, Joseph comes back with several small requests. Later the shepherds arrive none too stealthily, and then the magi arrive. When the noise becomes too much, he marches himself out to the stable where the crowd silences him before he can vent his rage... because the baby is asleep. Only then do you get the Christmas card moment where all are silently surrounding the miracle that is Jesus. The scene slows us down and moves us to a sense of peace and a quiet joy.

But this is not us most of the time, and this is not the story that Luke tells us. There’s a young woman, away from her home, pregnant with her first child. Even easy labors are not completely silent. I wonder whether it can be an easy thing for God to take on human flesh. If I were Mary, calm would be the last thing on my mind.

And then there is Joseph... who is silent in Luke’s account, but surely his thoughts are troubled. I wonder if he looks for features that are his own on the infant Jesus or those of another man whom his wife may have known. Beyond these concerns, he has the government to worry about. He’s only in Bethlehem because Caesar wants to count him; and Caesar only wants to count him, so that he can tax him. Belonging to a conquered people makes life hard, just the practical making ends meet kind of hard. Any second thoughts, Joseph?

And what of the shepherds, hoping perhaps for a quiet night, hoping that the predators stay away, that none of the flock wanders off? A few may already be asleep when the angel appears and begins with a firm, “Fear not!” and not just because the sudden appearance of angels is startling, but because the shepherds know about fear. Like Joseph they are among the conquered. Unlike Joseph they are also social outcasts from among their own people. Their profession isn’t respectable. Their wages are minimal. Their work can be dangerous. And they can’t afford to lose this job because there’s nowhere else they can go.

But the good news does come to them and with great fanfare, a host of angels singing. Our Christmas knows this jubilant singing. We have carols that awaken the joyful noise within the heart. By the manger, we want silent awe, but in the fields, there’s a party going on.

And then a shepherd gets the idea that they should go see this thing of which the angel spoke. Did they worry about the sheep? Or maybe that’s the reason for the haste; not

because they were so eager to see the Christ Child, but because they had jobs to get back to, jobs they couldn't afford to lose, wages they couldn't do without. Did they worry about the penalties for sheep lost to predator or mishap?

Could Mary, at such a tender age, have been so sure of her vision that the pain of childbirth, the reality of her infant son in flesh and blood, and the very humble circumstances of the birth, wouldn't have shaken her confidence that through her womb God was entering the world to save it? Would we be amiss in suggesting that Joseph may have harbored lingering doubts about the origin of this child or remained skeptical about his prospects under Roman rule? Would it be wrong to make more of the shepherds' fear and haste than we do?

The birth of Jesus, as Luke tells it, was not the Christmas card scene where all is right with the world, just forget all those challenges we face in life. It begins with a decree from the emperor which Joseph is powerless to resist. He is born to a woman in awkward circumstances, protected by a man who could easily have abandoned her. And this momentous event is shared only with the fearful, disreputable and hasty shepherds. The birth of Jesus takes place through people like us in a world like ours. The "good news of great joy" given to the shepherds is for us as well, for "all people," says Luke.

"To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior...." To you, Mary, who has accepted the vision and believed that God might enter the world through your womb; to you, Mary, who is willing to endure pain and potential social rejection for the sake of this vision; to you, Mary, who must have wondered, doubted, even mistrusted your youth, is born this day, a Savior.

To you, today, who know the world's pain and troubles, but still hope for a better world, a better life, is born this day... a Savior. To you who have been given a vision despite your youth and inexperience and believe that God might enter the world through the work of your hands, is born this day... a Savior. To you who are uncertain of God's calling or your own abilities, who are doubtful about the world's future; to you is born this day... a Savior.

To you, Joseph, who has set aside your doubts, and remained faithful to the vulnerable Christ bearer; to you who may have wavered in your decision to do the right thing. To you, Joseph, is born this day... a Savior.

And to you, today, who stand by the vulnerable, the disenfranchised and the marginalized; to you who wonder whether you have the strength and courage to stand with the poor; to you is born this day... a Savior.

To you, who like the shepherds, live in fear for your lives or your livelihood; to you who are not regarded with the dignity due to every human being; to you who live at the edges of life, ignored or unwanted; to you is born this day, a Savior.

To you, who, like the shepherds, are always in a hurry; to you tied down to your own economic self-interest; to you incapable of slowing down; to you is born this day... a Savior.

Whether you are excited about a calling or embarrassed by a failure, you are in this story. The world Luke describes shares some common features with our world. Both have more than enough troubles to go around and both are filled with people hesitant to be the one through whom God enters the world. There will always be those who set aside their doubts and insecurities in order to respond to the vision given by God. And because there were some like Mary and Joseph and certain poor shepherds, Jesus was born. There were others who kept him safe and nurtured him so that one day he would bring us wisdom, healing, truth and love. Luke doesn't just tell us a story from long ago. He invites us into a story that began long ago and continues to the present day. There is much to be fearful and doubtful of today. The message of the angel remains relevant and encouraging: "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." To Mary, to Joseph, to shepherds, and to you.

Amen.