

From Generation to Generation: We Tell This Story

Luke 2:1-20

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Our Christmas Eve Gospel reading comes from Luke 2,

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child. And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them. That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often.

The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

This is the word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God!

Almost a century ago on a Christmas Eve, a Jewish lady named Mrs. Rosenberg found herself stranded at a fashionable resort, one that did not admit Jews. The desk clerk looked down at his book and said, "Sorry, no room. The hotel is full." Mrs. Rosenberg said, "But your sign says that you have vacancies." The desk clerk stammered and then said curtly, "You know that we do not admit Jews. Now if you will try the other side of town ..."

Mrs. Rosenberg stiffened noticeably and asked, "Do you know the story of Christmas young man?" The desk clerk looked offended and said, "Well, of course I do!" "Oh, really?" Mrs. Rosenberg said. "Then tell me, how was Jesus born?" "He was born to a virgin named Mary in a little town called Bethlehem," the clerk proudly replied. "Very good," said Mrs. Rosenberg. "Tell me more." "Well, he was born in a manger," the desk clerk said. Mrs. Rosenberg stared him right in the eye and said loudly, "That's right, because a nasty man just like you wouldn't give a Jewish lady a hotel room for the night!"

Christmas is the celebration of the good news that God so loved the world that God became a part of it in the frail flesh of a child. Despite the world's best efforts to keep him out, God simply intrudes. The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin's womb and an empty tomb. Over and over again, the Christmas story reminds us that God shows up where we least expect him, especially among those who think they are the least deserving. Christmas is the good news that God is with us, and God is for us.

The King of Kings wasn't born to a princess in a palace. He was born to a simple girl and laid in a manger. The Prince of Peace was not adorned with velvet robes. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. The good news of the Savior's birth was not announced to heads of state, but to shepherds out watching their flocks by night. The Creator of all things, the mysterious One, becomes visible, small and vulnerable.

And while this is good news for all people, it is especially good news for those who know they don't deserve it, those who don't have it all together, those who know they haven't got a prayer, those

who often feel small and vulnerable, those who know their lives are broken beyond repair, those who know beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are in bondage to sin and cannot free themselves. It is to such as these that Christmas announces this great good news: God is with us, and God is for us. I'm not sure how it happened, but so many people seem to think that God is only with and for the "good" people, whoever they are. But Christmas announces the good news that, no matter how unworthy other people might think we are of God's love, or how unworthy we might think we are of God's love, God is for us and God is with us. God chooses to love and forgive us. No matter who you are, no matter where you've been, no matter what you've done or have failed to do, God's love is for you – not because you're good, but because God is. And yet so many of us seem to struggle with this reality.

A few months ago, I ran into a woman in a local coffee shop who was going through a really difficult time making ends meet. Rather than blame other people or circumstances for her challenges, this woman took full responsibility. By her own admission she had made a number of poor choices. She didn't take her education seriously, and so her job prospects were limited. She had abused her body with drugs and alcohol, and so she had numerous health issues. She had made some bad relational choices and had burned more than a few bridges. And now she was trying to provide for herself and two young children alone.

As I listened to her story, I not only heard despair in her voice; I heard guilt and shame. I told her about Mission Outpost and how we could help with some of her basic needs, but she just hung her head and said, "Get help from a church? I could never do that. After all I've done, I'm sure God wants nothing to do with me."

Ouch!

Maybe you've been there. Or maybe you're there today. You've blown it. You're buried in guilt and shame, and so you're certain that God wants nothing to do with you. Maybe your circumstances are so dark and difficult that you've come to believe that God has abandoned you, that God could never love you. Let the story of Christmas point you to the truth that you are loved. God's love isn't based on our worthiness, but on God's goodness. The gift of Christmas, the gift of Jesus, is the gift of love.

We could not reach to heaven to earn God's love, and so love came down to lift us up.

And we, like children, can do little more than receive the gift. And now, like stars at the top of the Christmas tree we go out into the world to shine that love into the lives of others so that they, too, may dare to believe that the gift of Christmas, the gift of God's love, is for them.

Let's pray....

Lord Jesus, you left the peace of heaven to enter into the chaos of this world, taking off the robes of royalty and putting on the flesh of humanity. We stand in awe that you said "yes" to incarnation, to being born in a stable. Fill our hearts with awe and wonder this night, and the faith to embrace the gift of your great love. This we pray in your holy name. Amen.