

Hopkins South Monterey

United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

December 26, 2022

Pastor Kelsey

Luke 2:1-21 NRSV

2 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 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. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 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 in the guest room.

8 Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 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: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

15 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." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, 19 and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

21 When the eighth day came, it was time to circumcise the child, and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Prayers & Sermon

*O Holy God,
we need this story—this Christmas story.
We need this story of ordinary people who were brave.
We need this story of love that changed the world.
We need this story of angel choruses that give reason to hope,
and starlight that reminds us to look up.
In a battered and bruised world,
we gather around your Word
like people gather around a fire
to warm themselves.
So we are here,
gathered together
to warm ourselves by your light,
because we need this story.
We need the truth that lies deep in these holy words.
So today we pray:
scoop out space in us to truly listen.
Quiet our minds.
Open our hearts.
Kindle the fire.
Amen.*

Read *The Nativity*

This is a familiar story, we tell it every year, we hear carols that celebrate it all season long, we sing hymns that remind us to revere the birth of Jesus. Most of us know this story well. And yet, it tends to be that the stories we know well are worth telling and retelling. The Christmas story is a special and important story among the many stories within our faith. What is a part of the Christmas story that has kept your attention?

Perhaps part of what makes the whole Christmas story so interesting is that it is a story that continues to shake up our status quo and surprise us again and again. This story that has become so familiar, is a pretty strange one. There is a young couple with a trying start to their marriage, some orders from the emperor that don't make so much sense to us anymore, a long journey with a very pregnant woman, staying in an animal shed to birth that baby, then there are shepherds and angels with great news and visits from strangers into the already over-crowded space. All these wild and weird things make this a more interesting story to tell, but it has also lasted because of the deep and powerful things all those weird aspects tell us about who our God is. As we are invited to come to the manger and witness the birth of Christ, the nativity story in its glory and

its grit reminds us that God dwells with us. God wants to be with us wherever we are—be it the holiest space or a pooppy animal stall. God wants to be with us in all parts of our lives—be it the moments we can imagine a choir singing our praises or when we are exhausted and unsure and feeling out of place. God wants to be with us all—even those deemed powerless, unworthy, or unwelcome by others. As we hold onto the hope and good news that God wants to be with us from the gritty to the glory, we can better remember that we can find ourselves in the holy stories, even the ones that feel the most holy. We may have had the same experience as Mary, Joseph, their family or the shepherds, but perhaps we can relate more than we might initially expect. In her artist statement for “How God Shows Up,” Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity writes: “Each year, we tell this story because it is raw with joy, pain, and the complexities of being human. No matter how your story is unfolding, may you find that this sacred story holds space for you. For this is how God shows up—in a child who cries, in hands that hold, in human flesh, in life and in death.” Take a second to think about where you find yourself in the Christmas story? Think about which characters do you identify with or feel distant from? What emotions do you carry with you as you imagine your place in this narrative? Would anyone like to share where they see themselves in the story?

Perhaps I feel a bit of a connection to the shepherds, not always knowing where God has already been at work, but glad to hear it and run toward it when I find out.

I imagine that we all will see ourselves in different places in the story in different parts of our lives. I know I have heard from other women clergy that have been pregnant during Advent that they find a whole new connection to the story. And that is part of why this is a story we need to hear again and again. We may need different parts of the story at different times of our life, but no matter where we may find ourselves, we always need that hope and good news that God is among us.

We tell this story because sometimes it isn't so easy to see God among us, sometimes it isn't so easy to find hope and we don't always have a lot of good news. Even Mary had to take a moment in the midst of this story and let it all soak in. Mary, who had been visited by the angel, had been carrying the holy child, had visited with Elizabeth who was going through something similar, who had faced those nine months with such courage and vulnerability and had then brought that on ten-fold as she birthed a child away from home among the livestock. She also took some time for some postpartum care, perhaps a good meal, time with compassionate companions and rest.

In our scripture for today, there is this little moment after all the fanfare and excitement of the birth of Jesus and the angel's loud visit to the shepherds. As the shepherds come and visit the holy child in their humble lodgings, they share what the angels had told them about Jesus. The text says,

“16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, 19 and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”

A reminder, what they had been told by the angels is this:

“Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the

Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13... multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Mary knew what she knew from her visit from the Angel back when she conceived, she had been told that her son would be the Son of God, he would be holy and he would reign over the throne of David forever. Joseph had been told he would save his people from their sins. But that's all they knew from the angels. So, after that uncomfortable journey from Nazareth and an even more uncomfortable labor and delivery of Jesus, here come these strangers with more angel insight. The birth of Jesus is to bring great joy for all people, he is a savior, he is The awaited Messiah, the Lord. He brings with him glory and peace. Naturally, those who heard the shepherds tale were amazed, but we are specifically told that “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” Though it is unlikely that that stable room full of relatives and shepherds and who knows who else was anywhere near quiet, in the face of all this glory and excitement, we are told that Mary spent some quiet time internally, holding on to the special moment, to her special child, to all that she was getting to be part of. Perhaps this ponderance wasn't all joy. I imagine that she was feeling relief in a healthy birth to welcome her child, but hearing who he is and who he is meant to be, she probably also started to feel some anxiety, some worry, some concern for what that all would mean for her sweet tiny babe. But perhaps she also heard this message from the shepherds, and after a very normal and real birth in a non-optimal place, she felt relieved to be reminded that God was with her through it all, and not just with her in spirit, but now, as she held her sweet child, she held the divine and could feel the weight of the divine child with her. The divine presence was with her in tangible ways, holding her in the joy and all the other emotions swirling around. And so, Mary takes time in the midst of all the hecticness around her to ponder the news of who her child is and how God has worked through and around her. Perhaps this message shared from the shepherds is her anchor in the midst of all that was happening and all she could imagine was coming. Perhaps she is pondering this message and pressing it into her mind so she can commit their message to memory and hold onto it for the hours, days, years to come. How might this message that she imprinted on her heart sustain her in the years to come, being mother to Jesus?

Though we rarely spend time in the quiet moments of the Christmas story, perhaps it is those moments, and the moments like them in our own faith journeys that keep us telling this amazing story. We know that we need to take the time to ponder this story in all its glory and humbleness so we can hold on to the good news in our heart and be sustained through all that life will continue to bring. Christmas is our annual reminder, not just to find joy and peace, love and hope in the world, but to be reminded that our God came to be among us, to experience real life, to have relationships and hardships and share conversation and meals with us. Every year we put out the decorations and we spend weeks celebrating and preparing to celebrate, and those are important and holy moments. But perhaps, like Mary, pondering God and her journey quietly in her heart in the midst of the chaos, we also end up seeing God, feeling God, among us in the quiet moments, in the mundane moments, in the hard moments. This Christmas

hasn't been exactly typical for many of us, the weather changed a whole lot of plans! But I hope that you can spend some time reflecting on where God was with us during those upended days. Perhaps you felt the presence of the divine all the more or in a different way than usual by having a quieter holiday. Ponder those moments in your heart, commit them to memory, and may they sustain you through the rest of the year until we come back to this story again.

Every Year by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

My heart and I have an agreement.
Every year we show up here—
here in the sanctuary,
here with the candles and the tall ceilings,
here with the creaky church pews
and the songs of silent nights.
My heart and I have an agreement.
Every year we show up here—
at the end of the year,
after another 12 months
of humanity, of me
trying to
keep it all together,
trying to
keep my head above water,
trying to
keep up appearances.
Every year we show up here.
We drop it all.
We leave it at the door.
We come into this space
and I could swear it feels different.
Maybe it's God.
Maybe it's hope.
Maybe it's love.
But whatever it is,
I need it
every year,
so we show up here.
Tell us again the story of tonight.
My heart needs it.

call to confession

*As a kid I used to think the prayer of confession was scary.
I thought it was a moment designed to make me feel guilty, intended for eyes cast down
and
shoulders hung low. But that's not it at all.*

The prayer of confession is an invitation.

It's an opportunity to say, "This is who I've been, and this is who I long to be."

So let us pray together. Let us be truth tellers. Let us hold our heads high and speak honestly before God and one another.

This is easy to do when we are surrounded by a God who delights in us.

Friends, let us pray:

prayer of confession

Holy God,

We admit—we don't fully understand the Christmas story.

We are not familiar with angel choruses.

We have not walked many miles to be counted in a census,

and we don't always hear your voice in our dreams.

We don't fully understand this story, so we admit, sometimes we hesitate to tell it.

Instead of running out into the streets to shout that there is a love bigger than we could imagine,

we whisper this good news.

Instead of throwing open the doors and inviting people in,

we simply leave them unlocked, hoping folks will figure it out.

Instead of telling the next generation why this night matters so much,

we stay quiet, afraid of creating pressure.

Forgive us for our silence.

Forgive us for our hesitation.

Forgive us for the moments when we fail to share your good news.

Plant this story of love so deep in our bones that we cannot help but share it from generation to generation. Amen.

words of forgiveness

Friends, repeat after me:

No matter where we go,

No matter where we go,

No matter what we say,

No matter what we say,

No matter what we do,

No matter what we do,

We belong to God.

We belong to God.

We are held.

We are held.

We are loved.

We are loved.

We are forgiven.

We are forgiven.

Amen!