

Christmas
December 25, 2021
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Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

What a difference a year makes.

Well, yes and no.

This year *is* different from last year. Last year, there were just eight of us here on Christmas Eve. We streamed a simple service at 6 pm. I watched it again this past week. It was lovely in its own way, but a bit gloomy too. I said as much in my sermon last Christmas.

This *is* better. More festive. More celebratory.

But it's not the same.

We had nearly 400 in attendance at our three Christmas Eve celebrations the year before.* I expect far fewer this year. And that means we are not all here. I am glad that more of us are able to gather together here this year, but I am also keenly aware that we are not all gathered safely here. And I am intensely aware of the omicron variant on our horizon. There is still a cloud hanging over us. We are not yet as carefree and lighthearted as I thought we'd be by now.

And yet we are gathered – some of us in the flesh and some of us in front of a screen – to celebrate Christmas. We have come to worship Jesus, the babe born in a manger, the Word made flesh and dwelling in our midst, the miracle of love incarnate.

We're a mixed lot gathered here tonight, at least if this Christmas is anything like the others:

- Some of us are local. Some of us are not.
- Some of us accustomed to going to church (this church or some other). Some of us not.
- We are young. And we are old ... *ER*.

An old friend and former colleague from the years I spent in Chicago, Sam Portaro, has said that's as it should be, especially at Christmas.

If we look around the manger, ... we find that they were as diverse a lot as one might find. Like us.

For truth be told, when you get right down to it, we probably really do not have much in common, you and I; the only thing we have in common is ... Jesus.¹

* We had 101 at 4 pm, 180 @ 7 pm, and 110 @ 9 pm, totaling 391.

Our familiar crèches hint at that truth: Jesus at the center, a mixed lot gathered to behold him.

First, there's Mary. Luke had already told us about Mary. Luke had told us about her remarkable courage in accepting an impossible gift. Luke had told us about the fierce song she sang, a song about God's resolve to lift up the lowly and to fill up the hungry. Mary meek and mild doesn't suit her. Fierce and tough and courageous are adjectives that suit her better.

Luke hints at none of the details of childbirth. Luke says merely that Mary gave birth to her firstborn, wrapped him up in blankets, and laid him in the manger. The blood, sweat, and tears of labor are all passed over. But we should give Mary her due.

After she laid Jesus in the manger, I imagine she looked at him and declared (if only to herself), "I did that. My body made him. He is bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh."

And maybe we can indulge a little stereotypical sentimentality and picture Mary's tenderness, as she looks at her newborn child in awe and wonder, as any mother might, examining his tiny fingernails and counting his little toes. And then, catching her breath and remembering the full import, perhaps she whispered, "I am holding God in my arms. This is what God has decided to look like, and all for the love of me." ⁱⁱ

One of the most lovely of Christmas carols, "In the Bleak Midwinter," includes this verse:

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air,
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
worshiped the beloved with a kiss.

Mary, at once fierce **and** tender, was an active participant in that first Christmas.

Joseph ... Not so much. Joseph was Mary's companion along her way, but not entirely a willing one. Luke doesn't talk about Joseph very much. Matthew tells us more. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a good man, but by the time he learned that Mary was expecting a child that was most definitely *not* HIS, the deed was done. There was even a time when he resolved to dismiss Mary, to decline any responsibility for her and her child, but God, it seems, had other plans.

And yet, though an unwilling father to this child, he stepped into the role fully. He became the protector of the family, willing first to adopt the child as his own, and willing later to do whatever it would take to take to keep them both safe.

I'm getting ahead of myself here, but maybe you remember the dream Joseph had, about how King Herod planned to kill all the male babies in the neighborhood, hoping that the newborn Messiah would be one of them. Joseph took Mary and Jesus and they all fled to Egypt where he had the good sense to stay until he got word that Herod had died.

That's Joseph. He didn't ask for the part he'd been given to play. But I'd like to think that as he stood watch that night, he had a moment that changed everything for him.

Yesterday – literally as I was struggling with what I'm trying to say here about Joseph – I got a text message. With photos. It was the announcement that one of our young families had just given birth to a baby girl. I got a little teary, even though I had nothing to do with it.

I'd like to think that as Joseph stood watch that night, something in him melted. He had had nothing to do with how this child had come to be, but still he got a little teary ... and the wonder of it all overtook him, the mystery revealed to him transformed him, and he, too, in awe and wonder, waited for his turn to hold God in his arms.

Of course there were shepherds. An angel came to them first of all, announcing good news of great joy. Shepherds were used to being left out in the dark and the cold. They were literally outsiders. (It was an occupational hazard.) People looked down on them, suspicious of anyone who spent their nights out in the fields. They smelled of sheep and of dung. Some thought of them as thieves.

But the news comes to them first:

Do not be afraid; for see -- I am bringing you good news of great joy!

And the angel told them where to go to find the child. Bethlehem, the ancestral home of David, but a backwater village all the same. Look for a child in a feeding trough there. This was familiar ground for them. The smells would not offend them. They found him in a place where they'd have felt at ease: a stinking stable. ⁱⁱⁱ

And when they looked upon the child, glorified by a host of angels, they saw someone that looked ... well, like them. Younger, to be sure, but the face of poverty they saw was familiar to them. They knew about vulnerability, unable to resist the whims of the powerful. They knew what it was like to be overlooked. This child looked like them and their children. It must have taken their breath away.

Look around and maybe you'll see the Magi. They're not part of the story Luke tells about that first Christmas, so they usually don't show up here on Christmas Eve. Which seems about right to me. After all, they were never invited. Angels never told *them* to come or where they could find the child, and so they arrive – uninvited and unannounced.

They weren't kings, *per se*, but they were probably used to being treated like royalty. They'd been given every benefit the world could offer. Education. Wealth. Others treated them with deference. They had time to pursue their interests. The wherewithal to leave the cares of their daily lives behind in order to follow a mad quest. Societal permission to indulge idiosyncrasies.

They knew only vaguely where they were headed. They needed to stop and ask directions and they were directed to Bethlehem. If shepherds were comfortable there, the magi were not. This was beneath them. The smells wouldn't suit them.

And when they saw the child, they saw someone that looked ... well NOT like them.

And yet they were overwhelmed with joy. (And they, too, were welcome.)

It is to their credit that they didn't let their preconceptions stop them from seeing this child as the gift to the world they'd been looking for. They looked away from the heavens and turned their attention to one of the lesser places in this world. And there they saw the one who had occupied their dreams. They stooped to pay him homage. And they gave the gifts in their possession, for that is why they had them in the first place.

The magi and the shepherds. Mary and Joseph. Angels, for that matter, too.

And you and me, too.

There are, as I've noted, more of us here this night than there were last year. But not nearly enough. Because until all humanity, all creation, glories in our differences – each of us knowing for ourselves that the love of God incarnate draws all sorts and conditions together in love – then we have yet to grasp the full meaning of Christmas, the full import of what it means to declare that we have come to worship the Word made flesh, love dwelling in our midst.

We're a mixed lot at Christmas. That's how it should be. Like snowflakes, no two of us are exactly alike. And yet we are all loved just the same.

We need not strive to fit in, to measure up. Do not worry that you are not good enough. Do not hide behind the credentials and accomplishments that declare your worth either. None of that matters on Christmas. For the good news, first embraced by Mary who volunteered and safeguarded by Joseph who got conscripted, the great joy first announced to shepherds who felt kinship with a newborn king and dreamed of by magi who were surprised by the one they'd been seeking ... the good news and great joy is that God has come to us, to one and to all, as love incarnate. Come, let us adore him.

ⁱ Sam Portaro, "January 6: The Epiphany," in *Daysprings: Meditations for the Weekdays of Advent, Lent, and Easter* (Cowley Publications, Boston, Mass., 2001), p. 55. Sam acknowledges that the same was true of those who came near to Jesus during his life and those who gathered around the cross when/where he died. They were all a diverse lot, from start to finish. That story begins at the manger.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Decked Out in Flesh," in *Mixed Blessings* (Cowley Publications, Boston, Mass., 1998), p. 49.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roy Uprichard, "Shepherds," in *Surviving Christmas by Loving Advent* (self-published e-book, 2021).