

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2016  
A Child Is Born  
Luke 2:1-20; Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14  
Rev. Dorothy Cottingham  
Christ the King Lutheran Church, Tigard, OR

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is a long tradition in my family of telling and re-telling our birth stories. Each of them is amusing and fraught with an element of danger.

One brother was born in the midst of the worst snowstorm in Minnesota history. One brother came within minutes of being born in the neighbor's car on the way to the hospital. My mom drove herself - dad was working out of town - 9 miles on country roads in the dark while in labor with me, stopping for each contraction.

There is a wild story for each of our seven births, and though I'm the youngest I know them all. You could probably tell similar stories from your family history.

Tonight we hear the best known birth story EVER. It is an astonishing story. The Emperor of Rome, Augustus is a scoundrel as a leader. He is demanding extra taxes from everyone in the kingdom, regardless of their citizenship or status. To accomplish this he requires that everyone travel to the town or village of their ancestry. He dispatches his minions to carry out the registration.

Faithful Joseph packs up his VERY pregnant wife and sets out, with the rest of the clan on the VERY long trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It's about 80 miles if you can take a straight route.

But they have to bypass Samaria because of the danger these Jews face when they travel through the region occupied by the Samaritan Jews. Think modern-day Palestinian and Israeli relations...it was tense.

It will take most of a week for the caravan to get to Bethlehem. Today you can drive the Yitzhak Rabin Hiway in about 2 hours.

There is no way to make reservations. The roads are crowded with people forced to travel for this registration. There are no fast-food restaurants and no motels along the way.

When they arrive at Bethlehem there is no place to stay. They accept the best accommodations they can find, the guest room of perhaps a distant relative. It is the room in which the animals are also kept. When the baby is born the only safe place to put him is in the animal's feeding trough.

What kind of supplies do you suppose Joseph and Mary brought along? Diapers, onesies, sleepers, booties, clean t-shirts? Do you suppose they were able to find a mid-wife or a doula? What did Mary or Joseph know about birthing babies?

I remember those first excited phone calls to parents and friends after the birth of each of my kids. I remember the excited phone calls telling us the good news of the births of each of our grandkids. Who told the good news of *this* baby's birth and to whom?

Mary and Joseph, scandalized by the circumstances of this pregnancy . . .remember, it was an illegitimate pregnancy by definition . . . Joseph was NOT the dad . . . they probably wanted to keep it quiet.

The first people to hear the good news were shepherds! That's right! Shepherds! Lowly, smelly, dirty shepherds. Not the grandparents . . . though they were probably nearby. Not kings or religious leaders as you might expect. No! The good news came to shepherds.

Living on the margin of society, one of the lowest classes of society.

It would be like announcing the birth of England's infant prince to cattle herders of Northern Ireland before Queen Elizabeth.

Shepherds! King David was a shepherd who was nearly passed over when Samuel went looking for a king to replace Saul because he was 'out in the field' tending the sheep.

Shepherds! The nothings, often criminals, always outsiders.

Shepherds! Doing their jobs, watching the flocks, AT NIGHT, outside the of temple, outside of the city, outside of the palaces.

And, LO! An angel shows up! And the glory of the LORD shined! A blinding light breaking into the darkness. It must have startled the shepherds more than anything they had ever experienced.

When angels show up, crazy stuff happens.

The angel says to the shepherds "Don't freak out!" Well, too late, that ship has sailed! The shepherds are terrified!

The angel says: "Hey! I have REALLY exciting news . . . GOOD news of GREAT joy! A baby was just born in Bethlehem! Imagine their blank stares.

The angel goes on: A SAVIOR! slack-jawed stares on the shepherds' faces THE MESSIAH! the shepherds remain stupefied. The angel recounts in great detail how they will recognize the baby. The angel doesn't tell them to go find the baby. Does the angel just ASSUME that they will?

The angel then tells them what to look for. a baby wrapped up . . . well, good grief, aren't they ALL wrapped up? I told you this is really weird . . . a young mom and a dad . . . and the baby is sleeping in a cattle trough. the shepherds remain befuddled.

SUDDENLY! Out of nowhere there's a bazillion angels singing . . . Glory to God and Peace on Earth. . . . imagine THAT choir . . . And then . . . the angels leave. And it is dark again. And it is quiet again

Whoa! What just happened? Did you see that? Ummm . . . I dunno, what did YOU see? Unsure if this experience is a dream, or drug-induced hallucination, the shepherds have a decision to make. They choose to check it out, to see for themselves.

Quickly they head for the city of Bethlehem, Where they find the baby and the parents exactly as the angels described it. Now, they could have said let's get back to work, it's just a baby, no big deal, happens every day.

Instead! The shepherds, at great risk tell everyone they meet about the baby, the Savior, the Messiah. And everyone who hears it is amazed. Amazed that this baby is born. Amazed that the news is coming from shepherds. There may have been some who were skeptical.

There is still skeptics. Some who find it difficult to believe this amazing story of God's scandalous and astonishing intervention for the world?

The shepherds went back to their jobs . . . *changed*. They went back to their lonely, lowly, outcast jobs  
GLORIFYING AND PRAISING GOD!

We have heard this glorious birth story again. What are *we* going to do? What difference does it make in our lives?

What difference does it make that THIS baby was born and lived and died on a cross and rose from the dead?

We tell the stories of loved ones who have lived. When my sister died friends told stories of the 'difference' she made in their lives. Will we tell the story of THIS baby?

THIS baby who was announced by angels to shepherds, THIS baby, born so that all the world can know God's presence of peace and unity.

I tell you the story of one who was born for YOU and for all people.

This birth story is more than a pretty, nostalgic narrative. It is the astonishing intervention by a loving God into a world that is broken by sin and selfishness.

It is the ongoing reality of God's dynamic and creative activity in this world. Not just once a couple thousand years ago for a few years, but here, now, in this place and for all time.

Go quickly now and spread the good news. Jesus is born, the Savior, the Messiah!

Glory to God in the highest and peace to all people on earth.