

December 24, 2019 Christmas Eve

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 3:4-7

Luke 2:1-20

[Governor Walz' letter to Secretary of State Pompeo, 12-13-19 Press Release. Jake Ownsby's Discovering Jesus' Midwife, 12-20-19. Sarah Bessey's Why Everything You Know About the Nativity is Probably Wrong <https://sarahbessey.substack.com/p/why-everything-you-know-about-the?fbclid=IwAR3IlkYxjLr3v23Owb5fJycN9EXCttvaRJXaX2fVdpawee6hri73MSwEkXs> posted on 12-12-19, referencing Kenneth E. Bailey in Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels.

Grace, pure grace, to you this holy night. Amen.

A few things that just... should be said:

I love Christmas Eve: the candles, the music, the angels and shepherds,

the power of God coming to dwell with us, as a baby, born here, again, tonight. I love it.

And, I know the intensity of nights like this: they are pregnant with expectation.

We each come with our own stuff.

Some come out of tradition, maybe even obligation.

Some come curious.

Many come tired.

A few come fussing or tense, these are challenging days, with so many expectations—our own and other people's, family schedules can get full, money can feel tight.

Some—especially those in the 10 and under range—come amped up on candy canes and adrenaline, eager for gifts, hungry for supper, hardly able to sit still another second.

Plenty come yearning, seeking something: a feeling, a word, that connection, the healing of a hurt, or the promise that this pain, this uncertainty might recede.

Some come lonely. In a busy season, it can be incredibly quiet.

And there are the memories, the grief that rests close by: it's been 6 months or a year, or 7 years, or 33 years, and still we miss them, still the tears come, still the holidays are tender.

And then there is the impeachment and the border and the climate.

Like I said, there is an intensity on nights like this.

There is an intensity when God is born.

The little olive wood nativity crèche that sits in the living room at our house has just a few characters:

(It's true that a couple pieces have gone missing, probably under the sofa.)

But still, I know the characters, so does my 6 year old:

There's young Mary and Joseph, and their donkey.

There's the baby Jesus.

There is a shepherd and a few sheep, together they represent all the shepherds, all the sheep, that must have been on that hillside when the angels came singing.

And there are three magi bearing gifts...that part of the story didn't happen for some time, and only in Matthew's rendition, but still our little crèche includes them.

We get these roles, that natal scene, so ingrained in our imaginations, it is hard to consider anything more. But God is born... tonight.

Luke is careful to tell us of the history:

When young Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem it's because of the census.

Emperor Augustus has called for a count, the better to tax you.

The better to draft you into military conscription.

The better to remind you of the life-denying control of the empire.

And so they go, to Joseph's family's ancestral home, to Bethlehem.

Did you read our Governor, Governor Walz' December 13th letter to Secretary of State Pompeo?

While a recent executive order "requires both state governments and counties to independently consent to welcoming refugees," Walz writes of our "moral tradition."

He leans into our sense of community and a culture of hospitality.

He talks of the economics and the social fabric.

Walz challenges this executive order, saying, and I quote, "The inn is not full in Minnesota."

So true, Governor, AND we need to look closely at what Luke is saying in tonight's gospel.

The word that is translated as "inn", "because there was no room for them in the inn"... that word might not be the best translation.

You see, scholars like Kenneth Bailey and Sarah Bessey and others are reminding us that our western eyes might be missing something.

"Middle Eastern homes of that time did not have the stable for the animals separate from the home."

Rather, most of the time, the home had two rooms:

"one for the family and the animals

and another one at the back or on the roof for the guests."

So a better way to say it, then, might be, "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 for them to stay."

That means that Joseph and Mary weren't denied space in the hotel,

but rather they found that the guest room was in use.

So then what? So then the family of the house, most likely Joseph's far-reaching extended family,

invited them into the family space, the space they already shared with the animals.

When I look at that little crèche, I assume isolation,

I assume an unattended birth, a sense of lonely independence.

But you know what? Sometimes our ingrained assumptions aren't the way things are.

Mary and Joseph were most likely traveling in some sort of caravan of family, all returning for the census.

And they weren't headed for a city brimming only with strangers, but extended, ancestral family—

family of the human and the animal variety.

And, there is hospitality, big wide hospitality.

And did this young woman, Mary, labor alone?

That wouldn't be the way it was done.

Rather women came, many of them, likely even community midwives, at Mary's side as she birthed Jesus.

We celebrate tonight the incarnation, God taking on flesh and dwelling with us, with creation.

With this read, loosening some of our assumptions, remembering the beauty of Jesus' middle eastern,

Jewish culture and his olive brown skin, this story gets wider and richer.

As Sarah Bessey writes, Jesus "came into the world, not isolated and alone and apart,

but fully embedded within a family and a culture..."

She continues, "The incarnation is the miracle: it's not Jesus' otherness but his us-ness, his human-ness,

his full experience as fully human and fully God together [...] that is the miracle" of this night.

Governor Walz is on to something in his letter: Indeed, the inn is not full.

Jesus is born this night into a wealth of community and possibility.

Jesus is born tonight, into creation inter-connected and inter-dependent.

Jesus is born tonight, into the waiting hands of midwives, into love enacted and embodied, by you, by me.

While we may be tempted to opt for isolation rather than community,

to hold onto grudges and forget how to forgive,

to be so bound by expectations that we miss the grace, the pure grace of this holy night,

Jesus is born, God is born.

Into the intensity of this battered and beloved world, God is born again.

Jesus is born, tonight.

Dear ones, welcome this babe and let him fill the house with love, pure love. Amen.