



The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
Christmas Eve ~ December 24, 2009*

Luke 2:1-20

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

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

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

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

Can you feel it? There is electricity in the air- a familiar excitement. The clear sense that something is about to happen- that as the Celts would say, the veil between heaven and earth is a little thinner. And its not just us, all of creation seems to be waiting with expectation, waiting because this is the night we celebrate God with us. The night by which we measure time- everything before tonight was Before Christ and everything after tonight is After Christ. Tonight is the night that warps or defies time- because while we celebrate the birth of a baby a long time ago, we are also celebrating the NOW of God's presence- the birth of Christ right here, right now, Dec. 24, 2009 in this room.

As Barbara Brown Taylor has observed, every Christmas is something of a time machine. The memories of Christmas' past wash over us, taking us back to the way life used to be. For me the sound of carols instantly take me back to the smell of pine trees, the taste of homemade shortbread, the bright gold box of Godiva chocolates that my Dad always brought home as a "surprise" on Christmas Eve, the racing my sisters down the stairs on Christmas morning to see who could get to the tree first-with not just a little pushing and shoving on the way. For some of us this evening, the carols may remind us of a life that we think should have been but never really was. The picture perfect Christmas that everyone else seemed to be having, but somehow always eluded us. But whichever of those two scenarios you find yourself in, tonight, whatever the question is about Christmas past, or even Christmas to come, whatever the question at all, the answer is right here in this room, right now. "This is our Bethlehem, where we have hauled the hopes and fears of all our years to lay them in front of a manger" (Brown Taylor, Barbara, *Home by Another Way*, Cowley Publications, 1999). So it is no surprise the room is humming, loaded with expectation and dreams. Dreams of life continued, restored, renewed. Perhaps dreams, hopes of life with a little more God in them- life into which God has truly "entered in". But what would that look like?

Well for a clue, think for a minute of your home, where, I am guessing, somewhere in the house are Christmas cards. Some of which have Frosty or Rudolph or perhaps just a pretty winter scene, but some of which may have a picture of the baby Jesus, probably with Mary and Joseph and maybe a few animals thrown in for good measure. And somewhere on the cards are the words: "joy", "peace", "love" or "hope". Cards, words that evoke a sense of calm, a sense of the divine- that, as people often describe, give us a sense of being "lifted up" to where God is, or "going up" for a little bit of heaven.

Monty Python, that rather cheeky English comedy troop, made a movie in the 1970's called the *Life of Brian*- the story of a boy named Brian whose life had some startling parallels to the life of Jesus. The movie opens with a bright star shining over a stable and three kings on camels following the star. The kings stop at a stable and go inside where they meet a rather gnarly woman and her infant son. The woman isn't interested in the wise men at first, but when she realizes they have gold, frankincense and myrrh, she lights up, delighting in this unexpected treasure and encouraging them, the next time they show up, to keep the gold coming, but maybe hold off a bit on the frankincense and myrrh. Unfortunately for her, at that same moment the kings look out into the street and there, at the end of the cul-de-sac, is the "real" nativity- a picture perfect stable with Mary, Joseph and the baby surrounded by animals, everyone sporting a big halo and the star practically touching the top of the stable. The kings rush back into the room, push Brian's mother off her chair, grab their gifts and head to the real Christmas, leaving a disgruntled woman and a screaming baby in a scruffy stable.

Now while this is a really funny scene, I think that Python hit on a deep truth. Because if the camera that took the snapshot that appears on so many Christmas cards had stuck around for a while and stayed focused on the little family, the glow of perfection would have dissipated rather quickly and the scene would have looked more like Brian's birth than what we think Jesus' birth looked like. Within a few moments of the shutter snapping the startled baby Jesus probably began to wail, not a little gentle murmur like the cooing of the dove, but a flat out newborn howl of indignation and distress. And Mary, still feeling exhausted and sore from giving birth, may have started to cry, overwhelmed by all that just happened. Wondering what the heck she was doing sitting in a stable with her new husband. Wondering why she didn't run when she heard God's daring proposal, thinking she should have listened to her Mom and married Jacob, the nice boy from down the street, instead of Joseph who seemed to shape his life based on visits from angels during dreams. How stable a future could that bring? And Joseph? His brow probably furrowed with distress as the weight of being responsible for this new family sank in and he wondered what kind of mess the angel had gotten him into and how crazy was he for listening? And, as an editorial aside, why were they sitting in a stable anyway? Joseph had family in Nazareth, that's why they were in that city. Why didn't his family take them in- what kind of breach was in that relationship? We don't know, but there they were in the stable anyway. And then the cow stepped on the goose, which honked loudly, the sheep shoved one of the pigs out of the way causing a great long squeal, and chaos erupted in the stable and reigned for a while. But then Joseph took Mary in his arms and told her everything would be alright- yes they were sitting in a cold, dark place, but really, everything would be alright. And Mary clung onto him and to her wailing baby

whose sobs began to peter out in that hiccough-y way baby's cries sometimes end.

I hope this is not spoiling your Christmas, but for some of us, the scene that unfolds after the snapshot feels much more like the reality of our lives. And the frozen image of perfection just doesn't even begin to provide any comfort for a life that feels far from perfect. Perhaps this is your first Christmas without a loved one, or the first Christmas your children are no longer at home and the loneliness feels overwhelming and the sound of carols brings back memories that for you are almost too difficult to bear. Perhaps this is your first Christmas since you have begun to win the battle against an addiction and you aren't quite sure what the script is, how you do that, or perhaps this is yet another year in which you watch your spouse struggle with the demon of addiction.

So what is the hope on Christmas Eve, where is God in this? Where is God when the stable of our lives erupts into chaos? When the hopes of all the years seem distant and the fears of all the years are crowding in on us? Well God is right where God has always been and will always be, right in the middle of the fray. The incredible good news of tonight is that God is in fact with us, right here, right now. No matter what sort of a mess we have made of our lives, no matter how imperfect the Christmas scene of our lives is, God is right smack in the center of it. And tonight all our notions of being lifted up to where God is are shown to be illusions, we don't have to be lifted anywhere to be in God's presence. God did the work and became flesh and still becomes flesh. Tonight the God-traffic out of heaven is one way; it comes to us and enters into our very lives. God doesn't need a perfect place to be born, doesn't need anything fancy at all. So if we are thinking we need to wait a little longer, get our lives a little more cleaned up before we can invite God in, the astoundingly good news is that God is born anywhere, anywhere we can nail a few old bits of wood together, scrape a little straw into a pile and make a baby-sized manger in our lives. So rejoice with the angels and the shepherds, because right here, to YOU, is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And he requires nothing of you- most certainly not perfection. All you need to do is reach out your arms, pick him up and cradle him in your life.