

Heaven and Nature

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
December 24, 2020
Christmas Eve – Year B
Luke 2:1-20



The shepherds are evangelists tonight, bearers of good news. The shepherd's news comes at the end of an ordeal, in the middle of a mess.

Mary and Joseph have traveled to Bethlehem from Nazareth, at the behest of Caesar, an emperor who prefers to be called Augustus ("the August One") when he is not being called savior and lord. I have traveled before, in a car, with my spouse when she was very pregnant. Let me just say, I cannot believe that the trip for Joseph and Mary, on foot, was inspiring or clean or anything close to perfect. I suspect it was chaotic and messy.

There are a lot of people on the move in the empire, a lot of people traveling all around the back roads of rural Galilee to fulfill their duty to Caesar. There is no room in the inn, as you know, and so a messy story becomes grimy. The barn in the back lot will have to suffice.

Luke is sparse with his language, and we have heard the story so many times we can gloss over and even glamorize the completely unglamorous fact that Mary had to go through her entire labor surrounded by the hot breath of animals, with no help from anyone except Joseph, in a *barn*. Again, I have witnessed the absolute miracle of birth, in a *hospital*, with trained professionals tending to my wife's every need, and it was harrowing both times, and chaotic, and messy.

Christmas cards and nativity scenes may depict Mary with soft light reflecting from her face, Joseph quietly in the background, the animals cute and cuddly standing or lying around, and little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes, but if we pause to consider the circumstances at all...it was a mess.

She has gone through all of this by the time the shepherds show up. Luke says she pondered their words. I wonder if she wonders what I wonder this night; just how it is that God *and* baby, God *and* shepherd-messengers, God *and* a manger, God *and* Mary, can possibly go together.

It is a radical wondering, to entertain the revolutionary idea that in Christ, heaven and nature touch. It is a wondering that can cause the world to turn. That God would be incarnate, which is to say, in the flesh, and not just any flesh, but in the chaotic imperfection of peasants in a barn, an unwed mother, exposed and vulnerable. The shepherds say this is good news, and it is.

For many tonight, Christmas arrives in a hospital room, alone, with supplemental oxygen or even a ventilator, family celebrating with them on Facetime, if at all. Christmas comes for many tonight in the messy emotions of grief; anger, sadness, guilt, magnified over 330,000 times this year. Christmas comes in a homeless shelter, a refugee tent, a battlefield. Tonight, for many, Christmas arrives amid broken relationships, uncertain futures. Christmas arrives tonight among divisions tearing at the fabric of our communities, our nation. Christmas comes as we all long for these long pandemic days and the fracturing they have wrought to end.

For all of us, Christmas arrives tonight in a world not yet as it is intended to be.

If Savior, Messiah, and Lord was born into the world in this way, right in the middle of the chaos and imperfection and mess, then God is most certainly born into our lives in precisely those moments when they seem most fragile, when we seem most alone, and God is close at hand when the world swirls in confusion around us.

So let us take our cues from the shepherds. The youth of our church did so when they stood in the parking lot physically distanced, wearing masks, holding a goat on a leash, all to say, "Let heaven and nature sing."

The children I saw on a computer screen for Sunday school, talking about the gifts they had to offer the world this Christmas, and even through the distance and the screens, their gifts shone like the Bethlehem star, proclaiming, "Let heaven and nature sing."

When Mary Sellers told me that the little project the Mission Committee envisioned to make blankets for those experiencing homelessness had resulted in scores more blankets than she anticipated; or every time I call on someone in our church and they say, "I have gotten so many calls from people in our church," and the love and connection is a balm in hard times; or when the new organ rang out in this mostly empty Sanctuary, the culmination of so much generosity and grit right in the middle of the mess; the word goes out, "Let heaven and nature sing."

Because it is here, in parking lots, through masks and screens and hundred-year-old pipes, in shelter from the cold, right here in this broken and beloved nature that heaven has touched, that God is born. So, whatever the mess looks like for you tonight, look closely. There is a manger in the middle of it, a light in the darkness. And that is good news. Amen.