

Christmas Eve 2018  
Luke 2:1-20  
St. Michael's Episcopal Church

We've heard this story so very many times. All the newness, all the strangeness is worn off. But maybe we can rediscover something of that oddness, just a little bit, tonight.

The story is set on the world stage: "A decree went forth from the Emperor Augustus, in the time of Quirinius of Syria, 'the first registration'" (in contrast to some subsequent action that the hearers would remember.) And at the word of the Emperor, all the world jumps to attention.

Joseph and Mary go from Nazareth in Galilee (in the north, a more "multicultural" area subject to cultural influences from the Greco-Roman empire) to Judea (in the south, nearer Jerusalem, highly significant to the history of Israel, but more "provincial" in Gentile estimation. A bit of a backwater, in fact. To the town of Beth-Lehem, "House of Bread".

They're not staying at the Hampton Inn. But they're not in a "barn" in the way we mean that word either. They are most likely staying with family (distant cousins of some number of 'removeds'), in a room at one side of a home, where the household livestock would spend nights in safety. The child is born, as children are around the world every day. And swaddled (for warmth and security) and laid in the manger. The animals' feeding trough.

The shepherds are outdoors, sleeping or waking in turn, taking care of the sheep. The night shift is as it always is, long and drowsy. Hopefully quiet. But not tonight.

An angel—a messenger of God—awakens them with a burst of light. "And they were terrified." Well, yeah!

Do not be afraid—as the angels always say, first thing.  
Fear not. I have good news for you, and for everyone.  
A Savior is born. The Messiah, the Anointed One, the Lord.

These are imperial titles. These are names, descriptors, that Emperor Augustus and his successors used for their own self-aggrandizement. The angel is telling those who listen, that Augustus is not the Savior of the world after all. That the title "Messiah" belongs to no emperor or monarch or political authority whatsoever. That the one chosen as God's anointed is a peasant woman's helpless infant child, now swaddled and sleeping in an animal's feeding trough.

This is the sign, the angels tell the shepherds watching in the night. This is how you will know that it is THIS child among all the children you might see, that he is laid in the manger.

"And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth to all whom God favors!'" Not just one heavenly messenger (because that might not be enough) but a whole battalion of them!  
Ding-dong, verily the sky is riven with angels singing!

“Let’s go!” the shepherds say to one another, after they’ve had a chance to check themselves.  
“So they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.”  
Three times, the story tells us, that the child is “in the manger.”

No bassinette. No receiving blanket or layette. Some clean cloths, and some dry hay, and the sweet warmth of animals looking curiously at this small creature in their food bowl.

Why manger?

French: “Manger”—to eat. Latin—“manducare”, to chew.

The child, who will call himself “the bread of life”, who will give himself to his followers in the outward symbols of bread and wine, saying “Take, eat, this is my body, this is my blood, do this in remembrance of me” is born in Beth-Lehem, the House of Bread, and sleeps in the manger, “le manger”, the feeding place.

He comes as one unknown; he gives away himself, all that he is, in his life and death and resurrection, for the life of the world, to reach out and embrace all of us and all that we are or ever shall be. To show us what the love of God will do, how far it will go, to be with us.

His importance is not that of a Caesar, or of a governor, or of any imperial power whatever. The chosen one, God’s anointed, makes his appearance in a way that is so small, so insignificant, so easily overlooked and ignored. Very few get the message, and they too are easily overlooked or dismissed.

“The maker of the world is born a begging child; he begs for milk, and does not know that it is milk for which he begs. We will not lift our hands to pull the love of God down to us, but he lifts his hands to pull human compassion down upon his cradle. So the weakness of God proved stronger than men, and the folly of God proves wiser than men. Love is the strongest instrument of omnipotence, for accomplishing those tasks [God] cares most dearly to perform; and this is how he brings his love to bear on human pride; by weakness not by strength, by need and not by bounty.”

--Austin Farrer, *Said or Sung*

In a world obsessed with power and authority, where Caesars govern by proclamation and violence, tyranny and threat, Christ comes to lead his people by service and self-giving. In a world where love and mercy are perceived as weakness, Christ chooses to be weak, in order to be infinitely merciful and loving. In a world desperate to acquire and accumulate, hoard and hold on with both hands for dear life, Christ stretches out his hands—from the manger, from the Cross, from the empty tomb—to give away the very life of the world.

The Word is made flesh, and dwells among us.  
Come, let us adore him.