

Sermon “God’s First Steps in Our World”
Kirk of St James
Sunday July 24th 2022
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There is some dissonance celebrating Christmas in July! It certainly feels different, for one thing it lacks the excitement and anticipation of the actual day. Which makes sense as advent builds us toward the birth of Christ for a full month. For me, it is also how the church calendar is reflected in my life. From the beginning of Advent through to Pentecost we travel through numerous church seasons including, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. There is a rhythm that meets its high point at the birth of Christ, eventually enters the contemplative days of Lent, and then the mountaintop joy of Easter. Then, much like settling in for a long winters nap like in *The Night Before Christmas*, when the liturgical green of ordinary time goes up after Pentecost we enter into a quieter period of time. The summer and autumn months do not have the highs and lows of other seasons, it is simply a celebration of the everyday and how we live our faith in light of the birth, death and resurrection of Christ. What can retelling the birth of Christ in the middle of ordinary time teach us?

With the recent travels headaches caused by the ongoing pandemic we may feel a certain degree of sympathy for the young couple who have to deal with more than delayed flights and lost luggage. Not travelling to see the top ten best tourist attractions, or to take some “me time,” Mary and Joseph are forced to travel at one of the most inconvenient times in their life. As one writer also pointed out “whatever governments count and catalogue, they will soon enough tap as a source of revenue.” So pregnant Mary, likely with a sore back, and swollen feet undertakes the uncomfortable journey to a city where her and Joseph quickly learn there is no room.

There is a book called *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson. The story is described as “it follows the outrageous shenanigans of the Herdman siblings, or “the worst kids in the history of the world.” The siblings take over the annual Christmas

pageant in a hilarious yet heartwarming tale involving the Three Wise Men, a ham, scared shepherds, and six rowdy kids.” At one point during the absolute chaos of the performance the youngest Herdman, who plays the angel announcing the birth of the Messiah yells out over the ruckus “Hey! Onto you a child is born!” The busyness of the Christmas season can sometimes make it difficult to hear the Christmas message, but luckily for us God made sure we could hear this joyful message no matter the noise and no matter the season! Often, I do not get to go too in depth with the Christmas story due to time constraints on Christmas Eve. Today however with the help of theology professor Robert Redman, I would like to look at its historical location, its spiritual location and its social location.

“The manger of Bethlehem indicates the historical location of the incarnation. The names of Caesar and Quirinius reveal Luke’s historical consciousness. God entered into human history as a baby born to Mary in Bethlehem.” Sometimes it is easy to lose sight of the fact that God entered our world. So often in theology and even with the language we use in church God can begin to feel like a far-off entity, or a nebulous idea that does not have an impact in our lives. However, when we stop to consider how incredible it is that Jesus lived among people, and loved, and wept, and healed and felt emotion it can be overwhelming. To know that he understood human politics, and human tendencies for better or worse. He saw the best and the worst of what we are and encouraged us to love one another.

As Robert Redmen explains: “some might say “...one “marginal Jew” living in the first century CE in a backwater province of the Roman Empire could not possibly be the full and complete revelation of God. The manger of Bethlehem is God’s counterargument: this divisive act of revelation and reconciliation was not an announcement of universal principals and truths; instead, it was a baby. The manger shouts back that God is capable of dwelling among his people. The first baby steps of the infant Jesus were the fulfillment of the age-old covenant promise: “and I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.” (Lev. 26:12).” There is virtually no knowledge of what Jesus’ life was before his ministry began with the exception of a few scant encounters, so it is

easy to lose sight of his humanity. We have a God who so deeply loves us, that they entered into the world as a small and fragile baby and who was held in love by his parents as they watched him grow. Unsteady first steps out the front door, would one day lead to him walking every pathway that led to humanity and all its needs for healing and love. I cannot imagine what a sacrifice it was for everyone involved. For God to send him, for Mary and Joseph to let him go, and for Jesus himself both human and divine to allow himself to be crucified on a cross. God entered our world in a manger and nothing was the same again.

Which leads to the spiritual location. As Robert Redman said “the celebration of the angels indicates the spiritual location of the incarnation. The Bethlehem manger is the divinely appointed intersection of heavenly and earthly realms that brings peace on earth...As God enters space and time, so the hosts of the heavenly realm break into the earthly realm to announce the incarnation.” The moment where the holy and human meet. Through this action God sets a path for reconciliation between himself and humanity. For generations people had heard about the promised Messiah, and no one could have guessed that it would happen like this.

Heavenly angels may have heralded his arrival but that was not who crowded around the stable door the first night. The shepherds the angels sang the Good News to indicate the social location of the incarnation...in the first of many ‘great reversals’ God bypasses the proud and the powerful.” It puts the verse “though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich” in an entirely new light. Jesus spent his first hours surrounded by the ones he was sent to seek and save. So often grace sneaks quietly into our lives when we least expect it.

Christ was born into our world, in the period of history when Augustus was emperor and Quirinus was governor. His birth was announced by the heavens in the fields where shepherds were working. The message was first proclaimed to those living in poverty on the margins, they were the ones first welcomed to his manger. That ministry of love continues to this day. We are currently in the period in the church year known as ordinary

time however, we are living and trying to understand our earthly lives in light of the extraordinary news of the gospel. Lives where we feel the weariness, frustration, and the demands of family and friends. Where we feel squeezed by the cost of living and taxes, and when we look at the world around us, we see unjust systems. We may also be longing for structures of meaning that stretch beyond our daily needs and concerns.

Numerous times this week in the middle of whatever project I was undertaking I would stop for a moment and wonder how the events of Christ's birth shape my life and faith—why does how it happened matter? While difficult to describe the reality is, it shapes everything about my faith. Knowing that God entered into human history, heralded by the divine, but known first by the marginalized, beginning a ministry that would turn everything the world believed about power, might, and success on its head. I challenge you this week to take moments in the middle of what you are doing, to wonder how things might be different, if Christ had arrived and ministered in any other way? What would have happened if he had been born in a palace? What would have happened if the Messiah led great armies instead of encouraging love? What if he had only been concerned with the most powerful? While difficult to define and articulate we know the world would look different. As it is, we do our best to live our lives in the light of the manger.

I want to leave you with a few words from Ruth Burgess as we close:

Christmas

Came simply:

A pregnant woman

A worried father

A night birth

A healthy child

Just God

Unwrapped,

Vulnerable,

Lying in a manger

Living in our world.