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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
December 24, 2018

Christmas Meditation
Luke 2:1-20

Merry Christmas!

In churches across the city, people will gather tonight. They will sing carols and hear the Christmas story from the gospel of Luke, some will even act it out. Some, like us, will light candles and break bread together to remember that Christ is the light and the bread of the world.

But it's not just in Birmingham that people will gather.

Three hours ago in Rome, the Pope offered the Christmas mass from St. Peter's Basilica, complete with candles and incense and a life size replica of the baby Jesus.

Right now in London, in the beautiful St. Martin-in-the-Fields Cathedral in Trafalgar Square, vicar Sam Wells is leading their midnight mass, where they light the Christ candle as we just did and celebrate God's birth in the world.

In Guatemala, families will soon return from church and gather around their kitchen tables to eat tamales carefully wrapped by mothers and grandmothers, and steamed in giant aluminum cook pots over an open flame. At midnight, strings of blackcat fireworks will light up the countryside in celebration of the coming of Christmas.

In the Phillipines, the streets are lined with paper lanterns shaped like stars, an homage to the star of Bethlehem shining brightly in front of each house.

And in Japan, in a strange amalgamation of Christianity and US culture, people are eating Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Along the US-Mexico border, people met to commemorate Las Posadas, the journey of Mary and Joseph through Bethlehem in search of shelter. The experience of the holy family is not unlike that of the thousands of migrants and refugees who wait in border towns to seek asylum or otherwise make their way into the US. Poor families, in need of shelter and safety, willing, even, to stay in a barn to get out of the cold.

In Germany and Panama, in Nigeria and Ethiopia, in China and Canada, in Israel-Palestine, in prisons, in shelters, in refugee camps, and even, I suspect, in Antarctica, people are celebrating the birth of Jesus by lighting candles, and sharing meals, and giving thanks to God for the gift of the Christ child.

In a world where 353,000 babies are born each day, an average of 4 babies each *second*, it is hard to understand why and how *this* baby, this Jesus, came to mean so much to so

many people. Born in a village in a backwoods corner of the Roman Empire. Born a Jew in an occupied land. Born to unwed parents in a stable and laid to rest in a trough where animals fed.

New Testament scholar Raymond Brown says to understand the stories of Christ's birth, we have to read them through the lens of his life, death, and resurrection – because that is why and how Luke and Matthew wrote them down in the first place. Jesus, a man we believe is the fullest revelation of God, lived amongst the poor. He healed the sick. He ate with sinners. He challenged every boundary people put up to keep others out. He showed us that God's power is made real not through violence or coercion but through the vulnerability of a baby, the vulnerability of a cross. He showed us that God's love is so powerful, not even death is strong enough to stop it.

Knowing those things about who Jesus was and what he did, it makes sense why the good news of great joy of Christ's birth is not proclaimed to Herod. Not to Caesar, not to a centurion, not to the chief priests or the scribes. The angels give the good news to the shepherds: shepherds who do a job no one wants, a job that involves sleeping outside with the animals, a job that by its very nature renders those who do it *unclean* – not just dirty, though probably that too, but ritually unfit for worship. The shepherds, men completely shut out of polite company, are the ones God seeks with an army of angels to say: Don't be afraid! Unto YOU is born this day in the city of David a SAVIOR! Christ the Lord!

When I was young, my church had an 11:00 service on Christmas eve that was led by the youth. The thrill of getting to hold candles in church intensifies when it happens past one's bedtime. I can't remember much from those services, but I do remember what happened afterwards one year. December is often mild in Louisiana, but that year Christmas was bitterly cold, with the possibility of snow. I could see my breath as I walked out of the church, my blue wool coat pulled tightly around me. Instead of walking with us to the parking lot, I remember my dad handing my mom the keys and telling us to go ahead and get the car warmed up, he had something to do but he'd be there in a minute.

My dad is a lawyer who has spent most of his adult life wearing a suit, which supposedly was warm enough for him no matter the weather. I remember watching him walk around to the front of the church, in the freezing dark, in his suit, the wind blowing his hair back from his forehead. I turned to my mother and asked, what on earth is he doing?

“He's looking for Alex,” she said.

Alex. Alex as a man who lived around our church sometimes. He had a mop of white hair and a bushy white beard – not unlike Santa Claus except he wore fatigues and a trench coat. He had been a lawyer at one point, but he was schizophrenic and couldn't practice law anymore, couldn't keep any job, and had burned his bridges with family.

And after midnight on Christmas Eve, my dad set out to find him, because he didn't want Alex to freeze. We waited and waited for what seemed like an eternity in the dark car, with the heater blasting, as carols played on the radio.

Finally, my dad got in, cheeks flushed with cold. Couldn't find him, he said. And then, in silence, we drove home.

Looking back on that night, I don't know what my dad planned to do if he'd found him. He can't remember either. There was a place downtown where Alex would stay at the beginning of the month when his check came in, maybe we would've taken him there to get out of the cold.

But twenty-five years have passed since that night, maybe more. I haven't forgotten the way the wind blew my dad's coattails as he walked away, searching for Alex. I haven't forgotten how it didn't matter that it was cold, or that we were tired, and ready to fall into bed so that Christmas could come. My dad walked out to search for this man who we hardly knew, simply because it was cold, too cold for anyone to be out without shelter, even if there was no place for them in the inn. Simply because he needed help, and we could offer it. And as I think about it, that taught me more about Christmas than any candlelit carols ever did.

Ours is a God who seeks us out. Who took on flesh to live with us. Who emptied herself of divinity to become a helpless baby, to walk among the neglected and forgotten, to bring every lost sheep back into the fold. Who sent angels to sing to those who had been shut out and left behind, to give the outcast and the poor the good news of salvation. Who still reaches out to us, despite our doubts, despite our sin and our brokenness and the wrong we have done and the good we have left undone – still seeks us out in unlikely places and people, in familiar rituals and in those surprising moments when the ordinary shimmers with sacramental light – when bread is broken, water poured, hands clasped, and love shines forth.

Proclaimed first on a dark hillside overlooking Bethlehem, the news of God's redeeming love has reached around the world and through the centuries, and so like the shepherds we all come, from Manila to Beirut to Birmingham, to pay him homage.

Thanks be to God!