



Sermons from

## “More Than a Story”

The Rev. Dr. Fairfax F. Fair

December 24, 2011

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2: 1-14

Most of us have heard it many times before. With a little prompting we can even say it from memory: “In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed...” Some here, some who struggle with questions of faith, may think of this as a quaint story with spun sugar crèche figures – but the familiar narrative should not be dismissed too quickly as just sweet fluff. Luke’s talk about taxes is timely; the topic occupies us today. So do issues of displacement and homelessness. And stereotypes persist around certain occupations. So, at a minimum, there is some timeless relevance to the subjects mentioned in the writings of Luke.

We know the basics of the story we read and which was just magnified in the last hymn. To comply with government orders, a young couple completes an arduous journey. They get to town – to Bethlehem -- late in the evening and can find no place to rest. Perhaps, in their youthful naivete, they did not think it was necessary to plan ahead, to pre-arrange a place to stay. Perhaps other people just got to Bethlehem before they did and filled what rooms there were. Whatever the reason, it is what it is, and the only sleeping space Mary and Joseph can find is with the livestock. Maybe that is all right. It allows the couple to dodge a few questions: you traveled here alone? in your condition? A cow or two, perhaps a goat for their evening companions: if the animals raise an eyebrow, it is only for a moment before they themselves settle in for the night.

“The time came for her to be delivered,” the story goes, and Mary wrapped the baby in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, in the animals’ food trough actually, as if he were, himself, to be nourishment, sustenance, strength for living.

Babies coming into the world are commonplace and always have been. What comes next is the spectacular: the sky filling with angels, weebegone shepherds finding themselves on hillsides illuminated by heavenly light, and celestial voices singing praise to God. No longer is this just another story! The shepherds hear the angel say, “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 Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

This not-so-simple angelic proclamation is why we are gathered here tonight, six thousand plus miles and over 2,000 years removed. No other story in the history of humankind has this kind of staying power, this kind of effect on people. Time has testified to the strength and veracity of what happened in the Middle East before good records were kept and before everyone had a cell phone with a data plan to transmit in real time the intimate details of the lives of common people. This news, this happening, has not vaporized into the ether like billions of tweets since then.

But God is not arbitrary, decreeing belief as Caesar decrees a census. So it is up to us to discern for ourselves. Is this miraculous event or story? Is there room in our hearts for a savior? Are our minds open to what defies comprehension and explanation?

After being startled by angels with the news of Christ’s birth, the shepherds go to see for themselves. What they see is ordinary – a newborn baby with his parents. But within this ordinary is the extraordinary: this child – foretold in ancient prophecy, human like all of us – this child is the manifestation of God’s love. This child – born of Mary, serenaded by the heavenly host – is the manifestation of God’s humility, a living demonstration of the lengths to which God is willing to go to show us grace, to win for us forgiveness, to give us hope.

In a baby, vulnerable to the cold, dependent upon others for food, God becomes one with humankind. The divine breaks into a world that cannot save itself, a world where the sounds of the boots of tramping warriors continue to reverberate, where people oppress one another and exhibit inhumanity, where, despite the best efforts of medical science, disease continues to cut lives short. The divine pushes into a world where the poor give up on breaking out of poverty, spouses give up on love, and youth give up on a better future. The divine slips into a world where the rich get richer and think income disparity will bring no consequences, where the poor are imprisoned while the wealthy walk, where the fearsome have nothing to say and the fearful say nothing, where rulers talk about peace while sending someone else’s child to war. It is to this world that God comes: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. It is to us that God comes, not to terrify but to amaze, not to stun with strength but to surprise with simplicity. What God asks of us – in the person of Jesus Christ – is that we love one another. This is not physically or intellectually

demanding. Neither is it complicated or complex. It is to become like children – vulnerable, accepting, and trusting – and to see one another as God sees us. It is to see all people as having worth. It is to see all people as deserving of dignity.

On this Christmas Eve, God does not come with horns blaring or missiles firing. God comes quietly, humbly. God comes to those who will receive him. God becomes flesh and blood and, in Jesus Christ, offers himself to us.

In sacrament and symbol, God's giving of self is all around us tonight. It is up to us to decide: is tonight's a simple story or something so much more, something life-giving, something life-changing?

God's gift is made tangible at the sacramental table prepared for us. The invitation to share in this meal is not given to the worthy but to the loved, and that is all of us. We are invited to taste and see that the Lord is good. After eating together from the hand of God, we can light candles or we can share with one another the light of Christ. His light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

As the shepherds followed the light of a star on a long ago Christmas, we, too, are invited to come and see Christ. We are invited to embody the light – literally to take the light of Christ into ourselves – to let it melt the hard edges of our hearts where we hold grudges and refuse to forgive, to allow it to overcome cynicism and replace doubt with a peace the world's madness cannot rock.

Friends, on this holy night and in the days and weeks to come, let us take Christ's light from this sanctuary into a world that so desperately needs it, proclaiming not a story but a truth, good news to all people. A child has been born for us, a son given to us, and his name is Jesus. He is Savior and Lord.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen.

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