

**The Church of the Good Shepherd**

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza

Christmas Eve 2017

Luke 2:1-20

*May God, who sent his angels to proclaim the glad news of the Savior's birth, fill us with joy, and make us heralds of the Gospel; in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*

Every year around Christmas time, I find myself searching for a quiet place to write my Christmas sermon where no one will interrupt me. I particularly like to write sermons in coffee shops, although I haven't yet found my favorite spot here in the Fairfax area. Back in Austin, Texas, where I lived for the past twenty years, we had lots of local, funky coffee shops – just about one on every corner, it seemed. Epoch Coffee was one of my favorites. It was one of those places where all the furniture is mismatched and the coffees are hand crafted, brewed from organic, fair traded coffee beans from a special roaster in San Francisco. The walls are covered in controversial and political art and an eclectic music selection plays over the audio system.

Early one morning in the final days before Christmas last year, I settled in at a table at Epoch, with my artisanal coffee in hand, to write my Christmas message of hope and new life. Some time passed and after a while I looked up and noticed that the place had filled with an interesting mix of people. There were young graduate student types working on their dissertations and discussing revolutionary ideas. There were hip bearded software developers wearing hoodies and complicated headphones busily coding the next application that will change our lives. There were slightly less hip young investment manager types wearing pressed khakis and open-necked shirts planning the next big investment opportunity. There were the pierced and inked, as well as a few disheveled and underappreciated artists. And then there was *me* plopped down among them: a middle-aged Episcopal priest, wife and mother, wearing unhip jeans and a sweater from Old Navy, and working on a Christmas sermon, no less.

I sat there for a moment and looked around at the interesting crowd and the edgy, political art, and listened to the squeals of the espresso machine and to the classic rap of the Beastie Boys that played over the audio system. And I thought to myself, “what a *weird* place to write a Christmas sermon.” But then I thought, “what a *perfect* place to write a Christmas sermon.” That many, if not most, of the folks around me probably hadn't darkened the doors of a church in a long time... was just right. That some of them had thrown all faith aside when they realized that church-going folks can be just as mean, selfish, and hypocritical as everyone else. That some of these folks were struggling with their own suffering, desperately seeking meaning and purpose in life, and yearning to find the source of all goodness.

To write about the incarnation of God in a world such as ours in a such a place as this such as that was, indeed, *perfect*. For the Savior of the world is being born right here, right now, for all people. The creator of the universe and source of all Love is at work in world and within the hearts of everyone, reconciling, redeeming, healing, and making whole all of us, no matter who we are or what we believe. Our God is the One who comes to us, born in flesh and as one who will suffer and rejoice with us, so that we may open our hearts to him. God is being incarnated just as lovingly and fully in the hip coffee shop as He is within the sacred space of a church.

Our patient waiting in the quiet darkness of Advent is over. And today, the ancient promises of the prophets are fulfilled and the good news of great joy is proclaimed. Today, God's hope and salvation is born among and within us yet again. Alleluia!

The nativity story as recorded by Luke is one of the most well-known passages in all of Scripture. Yet, as familiar as it is, every time we hear it, we can't help but catch our breath with the profound sense of awe and majesty. Historians may quibble over the details of Luke's chronology of the reigns of Augustus and Quirinius, but the evangelist's purpose is theological rather than factual, and he uses the census as a means to place Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, the messianic city of David. Joseph's ancestry connects Jesus to the Davidic line as foretold by the prophetic tradition. Jesus is a son of the house of David as well as the Son of God – and even emperors and governments may unknowingly serve the Divine purposes.<sup>1</sup>

Like Matthew, Luke places Jesus' birth in the time of Herod the Great, client king of Judea, and Augustus Caesar, Emperor of all of Rome and undisputed ruler of the Mediterranean world. In this nativity account, Luke sets up an implicit contrast between the Roman Emperor and Mary's newborn baby, God's Messiah, who will be ruler of all the peoples. At this time, Caesar Augustus was well-known throughout the Empire as one who had brought peace to the Roman world. In many Greek inscriptions, Augustus was hailed as "savior of the whole world" and also bore the title of *kyrios*, or "Lord." But in this birth narrative, Luke tells us that Jesus is the true Lord and Savior.<sup>2</sup>

Centuries earlier, the Prophet Isaiah described the ideal Davidic king with words that would later be attributed to the Messiah. He will be called "Wonderful Counselor" because he will rule with wisdom. As "Mighty God," he is an expression of God's power and presence. He is called "Everlasting Father" because he can be depended on to look after the welfare of his people. And as "Prince of Peace," he brings reconciliation to all of creation. His reign will establish enduring peace, with justice and righteousness for all until the end of time. *This is God's plan...to bring salvation to the world.*<sup>3</sup>

That the angel made the grand proclamation to shepherds tells us something significant. The birth of a royal child is normally announced with great fanfare and ceremony. But the birth of the Messiah was told first to the poor and lonely, represented by shepherds tending their flocks in nearby fields. Although Abraham, Moses, and David are described as keeping sheep, shepherds were considered among the lowest in the social order of first-century Palestine and were stereotyped as liars and thieves. The semi-nomadic lifestyle of shepherds also prevented them from keeping some of the finer points of Jewish law which made them ritually unclean. The Pharisees placed shepherds in the same category as tax collectors, prostitutes, and others who were considered sinners by association with their vocation. And it was to people such as these that the heavenly angel brought the good news of great joy. God has come among them! The Messiah has been born! The hope of all people and the Savior of the world is here!

And as we hear the angel's pronouncement today, we rejoice as well. The world is desperate for news such as this, that God is present among us. In times like ours, we yearn to experience and know the incarnation of God within creation. We need the Wonderful Counselor who brings justice and righteous wisdom to a world ruled by the power of "might makes right" and exploitative behavior. We need the Mighty God who brings us together and knits us into one community, one body. We need the Everlasting Father who heals and restores our wounded and

---

<sup>1</sup> Synthesis CE, Christmas Day-A, December 25, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Hare, Douglas; Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1; p.117

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

aching souls. We desperately need the Prince of Peace who brings enduring peace to a divided and violent humanity that seems driven to tear itself apart.

In this midst of this, we cry out: Lord Christ, come and be born in us. Come help us, heal us, and make us whole; make us righteous and worthy of bearing your image. Come and stir in us new and holy life. Incarnate your justice and blessings in our broken and hurting world, now and for evermore. The incarnation of God within his creation is an act of tremendous love and grace. Amid our holiday parties, tree trimming, decorating, and feasting, we remember the story of the birth of Jesus. Over the millennia, we have softened and domesticated this story of the incarnation of God in human flesh within creation to a quaint and romantic tale of a young mother giving birth to her baby among adoring and sweet-smelling farm animals. But this is actually a story of the wildness and strangeness of God's grace. If you actually spend some time thinking about it, it is a breathtaking and powerful story.

Like the shepherds, we would do well to fall to our knees and quake with fear and awe. The notion of the incarnation should not be taken lightly. Lest we fool ourselves otherwise, this is a cosmic event like none other and nothing has been the same since. Our God chose to demonstrate his eternal and divine Love by breaking into his very own creation, tearing at the very fabric of reality itself, to express his presence in human form....in the form of a helpless baby.

We do not need a soft, domesticated messiah; we need the untamed Mighty God that has taken on our flesh – taken on our joy and our suffering – and come to walk among us and share our lives. We need a God who is willing to come to us in the form of a fragile and helpless baby – a holy infant so tender and mild – to show us that the power of Divine Love is greater and more powerful than the constraints of this world.

Christ, our Savior *is* born among and within us this day. Let us rejoice and sing – for the good news of great joy is for all of us, whoever we are and whatever we believe. May the Prince of Peace reign fully in our hearts and then, through us, reign over all creation.

Amen.