

Christmas Eve 6 & 11, 12/24/2014
Luke 2:1-20; Heistand children's blessing at 6
Boone Methodist; Jason Byassee

It's so good to see each of you here.

Christmas is a time of *dislocation*. A lot of our usual church folks aren't here, they're elsewhere off the mountain with family or friends. It's also a time of *relocation*-- lots of folks not normally on the mountain or here are tonight here. It's fruitbasket upset time. Some of you are sleeping on the floor because Uncle Joe from Hoboken just popped into town. *Dislocation*. My family hits the road for west Texas tomorrow, we'll be *dislocated* on I-20 forever. So: a special welcome to those of you feeling dislocated and *relocated* here tonight. In the biblical tradition guests are angels or even the very presence of God, thank you for filling God's house with more of Jesus tonight than we would have had without you.

The Christmas story I'm about to read to you is one of dislocation and relocation. Mary and Joseph and the child she carries are dislocated from their home in Nazareth and relocated in the dead of winter when she's 9 months pregnant. Talk about dislocation. They're *relocated* in Bethlehem, city of David, where kings are born. Caesar Augustus from his throne in Rome wants to flex his power and so this fragile little family has to trek 70 miles, not on 321 like some of you at 50 60 70 80 miles per hour but on a donkey—10 miles would be a good traveling *day*. Here's the thing. God is so creative that he can take Caesar's whim and use it for God's purposes. You who feel dislocated take heart. In this story the *holy family* is dislocated. And where they're relocated makes for the birth of the king of Israel, the savior of the world. I wonder where *your* relocation will land you, and all of us? Hear this word from the book you love.

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the y of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, the Christmas people of God, **thanks be to God.**

I can't hear that reading without thinking of Linus reading it at the end of *A Charlie Brown Christmas Special*. Because I could understand Linus' little speech as a child watching on tv, pre-VCR days (that's pre-DVR too). Back then in church I understood so little. What does "Hark the herald angels sing" mean? I thought

hark the herald was like stop the presses. It sounded like a verb and a noun. Hark that herald! I didn't realize "hark" was a way of saying "listen!" the rest of the sentence means "these angels are messengers from God." It's a beautiful song, we are right to sing it joyfully. Thing is, now I'm a grownup and in the religion business I am supposed to know stuff, and I realize how much more I *don't* know, how little we all understand. That the God who created everything, who never changes, who is without beginning and without end, got conceived by a miracle in the womb of an unmarried Jewish teenager from the sticks. That the almighty one submitted to so fragile and dangerous a way to come into the world as a human pregnancy. That the one in the manger, because there's no room for him in our world, is actually Lord of all. I know it's all true, but I don't understand it. Whoever you are, however little or much you understand, there is more to learn. But don't plan to comprehend all this God stuff. God is always a mystery *and* a delight.

Three points tonight. One, power, two bands of cloth, and three relocation. Point one, power. Look how Luke starts the story, and notice how many times Luke refers to the decree requiring registration:

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Four times! The census is mentioned four times! The birth of Jesus is only mentioned once! Why do you register people in a census? You do it to tax them. To sign their sons up for military duty. To take control over their lives. Jews especially didn't care to have gentile pagan kings an ocean away telling them what to do. Caesar knew this, and did it anyway. He's not the only one involved. Quirinius, governor of Syria, also a big deal, with the power of life and death over his subjects in his hands. Luke is announcing who's in charge when God gets born. It'd be like opening a story today, when Barack Obama was president, when Pat McCrory was governor, one little family from Foscoe, from Zionville, from Green Valley, from nowhere important as far as these big deals are concerned, had to go against their will on orders from a pagan ruler on a ten day journey to be taxed and signed up to fight for a military they not only didn't believe in but actually thought was in violation of God's law. Now that's a Christmas bummer.

Anyone ever felt like that? Subject to the whim of someone you didn't trust or like or regard as legitimate?

Emperor and Caesar mean the same thing--ruler.¹ The one with power over. Augustus was his honorary title, it meant serene, godlike. He had nicknames like "savior," "bringer of peace," "announcer of good news." One first century inscription about Caesar read this way, "Divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, emperor of land and sea, benefactor and savior of the whole world." One announcement of the "good news" of Caesar's birth went this way

The birthday of the most divine Caesar is a matter of great pleasure and benefit. We could justly hold it to be equivalent to the beginning of all things . . . he has given a different aspect to the whole world, which blindly would have embraced its own destruction if Caesar had not been born for the common benefit of all.

What are some of the titles we use for Jesus? Son of God. Savior. Prince of peace. Mighty one. Ruler of all. Here's what St. Luke is saying. While one big deal in Rome thinks he's in charge, another big deal in Syria thinks he's in charge, the one who's *actually* in charge, is the one cooing in a manger. And not only that. Our God is so creative, he can take a lousy decree from a false emperor and turn it to God's purposes. Without the emperor's census Jesus wouldn't have been born in Bethlehem, city of David, birthplace of Israel's kings, where prophecy says the messiah is to be born. Caesar may think he's the only god in town, but he's actually a

pawn in the true God's game, and whatever Caesar does, the true God can use it to our benefit. Crucify my son? Ok, I'll make salvation for the world from that.

We Christians honor those in power. We pray for presidents, governors, judges. And we're here to remind them they *don't* rule. Not ultimately. Only Christ does. And we will all bow before him one day.

Point two, bands of cloth. "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger." You may know the more familiar language, she wrapped him in "swaddling clothes." With our firstborn we swaddled him as tight as we could so he'd sleep. Till we couldn't find a blanket big enough to wrap him up like a tamale. So we called the pediatrician. They said, uh, you're only supposed to swaddle him till he can sit up. Oops. My bad. Future therapy and copays. Here's an image of Jesus in swaddling clothes from Giotto in the middle ages. What do you notice? Jesus looks like a baby old man, right? Lots of babies do. Here's what he also looks like. He looks like a mummy. Wrapped in swaddling clothes he looks like he's wrapped for burial. Because he is. Luke 23:53 says this, they "wrapped [Jesus' body] in a linen cloth . . . and laid it in a . . . tomb." The swaddling clothes aren't just a sign that Jesus is loved as an infant. They're a sign that he will die. We *all* will die. But *his* death will be *for* us. It will make salvation for the world.

What will our lives *be* in response?

In the first century newborns were swaddled for a full month.¹¹ The mother would go inside, away from the elements, to try to keep the child from getting sick. She wouldn't go out, wouldn't wash, would hardly move if she could. The goal was to keep the child warm, away from illness, away from harm, wrapped up, bundled, safe. What a way for God to come into the world. Totally dependent on us. He's helpless, completely in need of us, to be fed, changed, *burped*. Do you remember the prayer of Ricky Bobby in *Talladega Nights*? Dear Lord baby Jesus, tiny God. It's funny because it's funny that God would submit to be tiny, fragile, needy, on us.

Think of the tenderest, most fragile thing you know. It might be an infant. It might be a hope you're nursing. It might be someone's tentative, hesitant step back toward God. I hear from you some signs of faith like this. Hey, I might be interested in visiting in the jail. We think we want to go on a mission to Africa. I might be ready to forgive my father after all these years. That's precious. Swaddle that up. Take care of it. Hold it close. Let it grow strong. God is in that swaddled bundle, and he's dependent on you.

Point three for tonight, relocation. Where does God live? God has an address. Some of us were there together this year. It's at 1 Temple Way in Jerusalem. The temple was where traffic between heaven and earth happens. In the sacrifices, the priests, the offerings, the holy of holies. That's what a temple is for. It's where God lives.

But where does God turn up in *this* story? To shepherds, in a field, working the third shift. Now careful here. There have been sermons that have slandered poor shepherds, maybe some preached in this very pulpit, maybe some by me. *Shepherds are dirty*. That's true but dirty isn't bad. *Shepherds are outcasts*. Not really, not in a farming society, animals are crucial. Shepherding *is* dirty and outdoors and smelly sure, but it's also a kingly vocation. Moses was a shepherd. David was a shepherd. *God* is compared to a shepherd: "God will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." Shepherds are just not *wealthy*. They are subsistence workers. They work with their hands at someone else's pleasure. They don't usually own enough land to make a living, so they often hire themselves out to cover their taxes and feed their families. They work hard. They're not poor, not rich, just ordinary. Think of an App student working delivering pizza, or a retiree who realizes social security isn't enough. What these shepherds also are, is they're in the right place at the right time for this. "Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest

heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” Apparently *this* is the address of God, the temple of heaven, and no one knew it. *God* has been relocated. Like so many of us at Christmas. In God’s case, from 1 Temple Way to an ordinary workplace. From a holy place with special people doing important things to wherever any people are doing any sort of human thing. From a galaxy far far away to your and my heart and this table where we eat tonight. *That’s* what Christmas is about. The Lord Jesus is born and is coming for you.

Lots of us complain about the commercialism of Christmas. I get it. Muzak in the stores in October. Corporations playing on our guilt to sell us massive amounts of stuff we don’t want that the people we give it to don’t need. In the *Charlie Brown Christmas Special*, the speech Linus gives criticizes the commercialism of Christmas. Here’s the thing. The excess of Christmas is sort of awesome isn’t it? In all its gaudiness. In a Las Vegas Gatlinburg Myrtle Beach sort of way. Both tacky and lovable. Here’s what’s remarkable about it. It’s a secular witness to the grandeur of God. It doesn’t even mean to be. But this whole hurricane of commercialism that we can’t stop and we all get dragged into bears accidental witness to God’s goodness to us in Christ. I don’t know how to explain that. But God is *always* taking our sin, our selfishness, our fear, and turning it by his grace into goodness we didn’t intend and can’t understand. May it be so this Christmas in each of our hearts, in our homes, in our church, and in the world God loves.

So that’s the best good news there is. *God* is dislocated. No longer far away in heaven, in Jerusalem only, but in each of our guts, as intimate with us as when he was swaddled in Mary’s womb and then her arms. God submits to be fragile, needy, dependent on us. As you’re dislocated and relocated this Christmas know you’re not alone. There’s a royal couple clad in blue on a donkey right behind you. And a whole host of the heavens praising God and singing. Hark that herald, angels sing. Christmas is here. That’s a reason to rejoice. Always. Amen.

ⁱ This entire section is owing to Joel Green’s terrific *Luke* commentary.

ⁱⁱ For this section I am entirely dependent on Mark Ralls’ terrific essay at *Faith & Leadership*.