

Sermon for Christmas Eve  
Luke 2:1-20  
December 24, 2009

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The novelist writes,

*'Who is this?' the world said, 'who is this blue-cold child and this woman, plain as the winter?'*<sup>1</sup>

Our world knows not what to make of this story. Indeed, you and I don't quite know what to make of this story. Even Mary pondered these words. We know the story. It should sound pretty familiar. This isn't the first time we've heard it. Our human condition is as old as the hills; so it isn't the first time you've *needed* to hear it either. What is moving toward us in this simple story is as old as God. So, there should be a lot here that sounds familiar.

Luke's story begins calmly with an administrative mandate, an inconvenient trip in pregnancy, and a birth. So far, ordinary. It ends with angels' visitation, an announcement of a "good news of great joy," and shepherds a whoopin' and a hollerin' over the dark hills of a forgettable Judean village. What do you think? Do you think that after this time-out they – like us – could go back to their lives pretty much as they had known them before?<sup>2</sup> Or do you suppose that, for this having happened, something you can't quite put your finger on is different?

We can speak for ourselves. What is different for us certainly our moral aspiration. We've had aspirations all along, and the state of the world is about the same as it ever was. Nor do we seem to mine some nugget of deeper meaning from this story. Our "meanings," such as they are, will probably be pretty much the same in January as they have been in December.

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<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* (New York: The Library of America, 1988), p. 413.

<sup>2</sup> "Once again  
as in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed  
to do more than entertain it as an agreeable  
Possibility, once again we have sent him away,  
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant."

W. H. Auden, "For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," *Collected Poems*, Ed. by Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 307.

“Coming at Luke’s story from our world, we stagger and balk,” writes Annie Dilliard.<sup>3</sup> Our world? James Dennison describes the world at the time of Jesus’ birth:

The Age of Augustus was celebrated by the poets . . . as the dawn of a new era. . . . The economy boomed, the temples were full. . . . Reform was in the air—reform of manners—reform of religion—reform of the republic.

But what appeared externally polished. . . .to be so satisfying—so pacifying, so fulfilling—was vacuous. . . . Augustus was a butcher . . . Every manipulator has his or her agenda—for those with eyes to look beneath the veneer, to peer behind the facade—the reality remains . . . brutal and tyrannical.

The empire began to die . . . [No one could] hold back the flood of superficiality, the deluge of the trivial. . . . [T]he pursuit of luxury became the primary aristocratic pastime. Rhetoric and oratory became the tool of flattery, i.e., saying what was expected to the rich and powerful. . . . Withered hearts. . . . embraced astrology, magic, the occult . . . . No values, no standards, no meaning.

. . . Pessimism, fear, helplessness, fatalism: these were the demons of the empire. And no one—neither emperor, nor senator, nor philosopher, nor diviner, nor poet—could exorcise them.<sup>4</sup>

Now this is really starting to sound familiar. We’ve met these rogues before. They are not different from us. Sixteen hundred years after the age of Augustus Thomas Hobbes would famously write of our human condition,

[E]very man is enemy to every other man . . . men live without security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them. . . . no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.<sup>5</sup>

These are they to whom this story is addressed. Luke does not shout it into the wind, but tells it calmly.

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<sup>3</sup> Annie Dilliard, “The Gospel According to St. Luke,” *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, Ed. by Alfred Corn (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> James T. Dennison, Jr., “Pax Romana, Pax Christi: Luke 2:1-20, *Kerux: The Online Journal of Biblical Theology* at [www.textweek.com](http://www.textweek.com).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Book XVI, *The English Philosophers From Bacon to Mill*, Ed. by Edwin A. Burt (New York: The Modern Library, 1939), p. 161.

*So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, . . .  
He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to  
him and was expecting a child.*

Considering the context, this is eerie. In all the swirling chaos of our lives, how is it that something so plain reach us here? In all of our earnest efforts to reform things and make them work this time, how could something so banal reach us? This story, even for those who on the survey check “no religion,” this story gets some attention. How is that? Perhaps it’s really true that the “hopes and fears of all the years are met” in this story, this birth and the world holds its breath.

*While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she  
gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and  
laid him in a manger,*

Into the night Luke tells good news that is “calm, plausible, and orderly.”<sup>6</sup> This God has been after you for a long time. It is not as if God creates you and *then* decides to save you. The “original and basic” will of God is that the whole world has *always* been the object of God’s grace, God’s gifts.<sup>7</sup> In this birth, God “. . . did not merely set a higher moral standard or frame a political ideal. . . . [The coming of Jesus enacted] the merciful peace God had in mind for the world all along and disclosed the future of God’s ultimate reign.” The birth of Jesus “is a sequel in an ancient scriptural story.”<sup>8</sup>

*There were shepherds. . . the angel said to them,. . . 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 Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

God has been up to this since the beginning. No wonder it should sound familiar. Now Luke narrates the unfolding of a divine mercy that is willing to pay the price in a world that will surely exact it. And then. . . and then. . . the angels appear:

*praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on  
earth peace among those whom he favours!’*

Gerhard Frost’s poem “Everything is Different:”

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<sup>6</sup> Dilliard, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> "The ordaining of salvation for man and of man for salvation is the original and basic will of God, the ground and purpose of His will as Creator. It is not that He first wills and works the being of the world and man, and then ordains it to salvation....He has determined to exercise redemptive grace--and that there may be an object of this His redemptive grace, a partner to receive it...The "God with us" has nothing to do with chance." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, p.9 f.

<sup>8</sup> David Tiede, “Luke 2:1-14, [15-20], Commentary on the Gospel,” December 24, 2008, at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

“And behold, angels came. . .”

Angel’s came.  
Our Lord experienced this,  
And my heart says, “Me, too!”

Nothing has changed,  
yet everything is different  
(don’t ask me to explain):  
My journey waits, my cross remains,  
my wilderness retains its wildness.  
But oh the difference  
since angels came.<sup>9</sup>

It is an ancient story that Luke tells so calmly into this night. It is a simple story, artless and plain. It is a story of a God that intends peace and friendship with his creation from the very beginning. You may not know what to make of it, much less be able to explain it. Even Mary pondered these words. No matter. Hear the story again. Let it work on you. And even though you cannot put your finger on it, let the angels come and with Christmas good news let them work their difference.

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<sup>9</sup> Gerhard Frost, “Everything is Different” (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), p. 15.