



Christ Church Cathedral: Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 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, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 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!"

[When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.]

It feels cozy here tonight in this renovated space with its new roof, its gussied up exterior and, of course, those bells, those wonderful bells. It feels cozy here tonight in this place of warm wood, light and the adornments of Christmas.

I think of Christmas as the coziest time of the year, for it's filled with gatherings of family and friends, special cold-weather foods and beverages of every kind and the candles inside or lights outside that make the darkness seem vibrant and rich.

I don't know if you're aware of it or not but the idea of cozy became what some call a lifestyle trend this last year. Originating in Denmark, the seeking of "hygge," that is, the seeking of experiences of togetherness, health, warmth, comfort, positivity, and coziness has taken some countries by storm.

"Hygge," in fact, is everywhere, finding its way into restaurants featuring stews, soups, hot chocolate and tea, houseware shops offering candles, slow cookers, teapots and cups, clothing merchandizers selling oversize sweaters and warm socks and lifestyle experts who tell us all to let go of the stresses of our complicated and demanding lives and instead to watch a movie with our sweetheart under a warm blanket, turn off the phone and cozy up with a good book, or invite friends over for home-cooked meal by candlelight.

Hygge, in fact, is now so en vogue that there are more than 1.5 million #hygge posts on Instagram, with the word hygge being shortlisted for the 2016 Oxford Dictionary Word of the Year.

And so this evening with the hot chocolate given out before the 5 PM Carol service, with the candles upon the altar, with the figures nestled in the crèche and with family and friends sitting together tonight with their warm coats around them, a person might rightfully pronounce Christmas at Christ Church Cathedral as "hyggeligt:" that is, full of coziness.

God knows, we all need it right now, with the year we have had full of polarizing politics in the UK and in the US, continuing acts of terror, most recently in Germany, and the seemingly ceaseless events of personal challenge and loss. God knows we need it right now with the winter we have already experienced in this city with its icy roads and sidewalks and stalled busses. God knows we all need a generous dose of coziness—of warmth, community, and comfort—as a way to tell ourselves that, despite everything going on in the world around us, we can do things for ourselves and for those we love that are positive and nurturing.

But as much as we may need this (and we do), our Gospel story and the very celebration of Christmas, itself, are telling us we need to be reminded of something more. For at the center of our Christmas celebration is the story of people whose lives are anything but cozy.

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered."

This is how our story tonight begins, with a decree from an emperor whom Romans believed to be the Son of God, ordering all to be counted for tax purposes. For Joseph and Mary, the poor unsophisticated couple at the center of our story, this meant returning to Bethlehem, Joseph and King David's hometown, for Joseph, we are told, was descended from the House of David.

And so right from the beginning Luke locates Joseph and Mary under a political rule that is coercive, and unfriendly, and in which they, as conquered Jewish people, are under the thumb of an occupier whose religious identity is nothing like their own. And though what we may want to focus on in this

story is the baby Jesus cozily tucked in with his parents and the animals in a manger, the bigger picture is something quite different: Jesus, the Son of God, is born into a polarized political situation that was always ready to erupt into conflict as the political, religious and economic elite sought to maintain control over those with little or no political, religious or economic power.

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” After describing Jesus’ birth, Luke’s story moves on to tell us about others whose lives are anything but cozy. And so we hear about shepherds, the first who receive the news of the birth of the savior. They are living out in the fields with their flocks. By Jesus and Luke’s time shepherding had become a profession for those on the bottom rung of the social ladder, those who could not find what was regarded as decent work. Shepherds were thought of as liars and thieves, with the testimony of shepherds not admissible in court, and many towns having ordinances barring shepherds from their city limits. Religious insiders took a particularly dim view of shepherds since shepherds’ duties kept them from observing the Sabbath, rendering them ritually unclean.

It is to these scruffy shepherds, people cast out and under suspicion, it is to these shepherds, and not to people in better circumstances, that the news of the birth of the Savior comes. And the message is this:

“Do not be afraid...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.”

And so through the story of the emperor-mandated journey to Bethlehem and Jesus’ birth there, through the story of the good news coming first to shepherds living out in the fields, Luke locates the birth of the Savior in the very world you and I would perhaps like to draw apart from at this time of year, a world of political, economic and religious strife, a world where some more than ever are vulnerable and under suspicion. To this world and no other Luke depicts the birth of the Savior as good news, but good news with a particularly important message to those under the thumb of people in power, to those who are poor and to those who find themselves vulnerable and under suspicion. “I am with you” the birth of the Savior says to them. “I am with you as you live under the conditions that I myself was born into. Take heart. Rejoice for I am with you as a brother, as a companion in the midst of the difficulties of the life you actually live.”

It’s the story of a God who chooses not to live above us or off to the side of us but who chooses to live our lives with us and, in doing so, bring us a sense of peace, even in the most difficult of situations. And although it’s a story from long ago and far way, it’s one that if we open our eyes and ears we can see and hear it still going on in our neighbourhoods, in our region and in our country. We can still see and hear of God

About a month ago on an Abbotsford bus route a middle-aged female Latina Canadian Anglican bus driver encountered the kind of difficult situation I mean. A young white man got on the bus and a little while into the bus ride began asking her questions in a challenging tone of voice:

“Where were you born?” he asked. “Were you born in Mexico?”

The woman, already feeling tense, answered quietly: “No. I was born in El Salvador.”

The young white man was silent for a while and then, suddenly continued, “Pretty soon they’re going to send you back to Mexico or to wherever you came from. If you hadn’t come here, I would have had your job. Pretty soon they’re going to send you back.”

At this point an Asian man who was also riding the bus, a stranger both to the bus driver and to the young white man, got to his feet, came forward to the where the bus driver’s seat was and simply began quietly standing beside her.

After a few more stops the young white man got up and got off the bus.

Tonight is Christmas, the day that Christ was born in vulnerability and defenselessness. Glory to God who dares to be born, vulnerable and defenseless, into the real world we live in. Glory to God who dares to be born into the lives of the vulnerable, the powerless, and those under suspicion. Glory to God who continues to be born to us each day in the courageous lives of the peaceful among us.