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December 27, 2020 – 1st Sunday of Christmas

Galatians 4:4-7 and Luke 2:22-40

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Emmanuel, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are only 2 days past Christmas – do you know where baby Jesus is? I know that some people have already begin to take down their trees, put the ornaments, nativity sets and decorations away, and are looking ahead to the good things that we hope will soon come in 2021. The stores have put the Christmas items on clearance and have begun to put out the Valentine’s Day cards and candy. But it’s not that way in the church. The season of Christmas lasts 12 days, from Christmas day until the start of Epiphany on Jan. 6. Sometimes it seems like we spend weeks or even months getting ready for Christmas – and then as soon as it comes, it’s over in a flash. Perhaps that is why the church celebrates not just a day, but a season of Christmas – to be counter-cultural to the world that wants to rush through the celebration once it arrives, and instead linger in the season a little longer.

Today’s gospel reading is the “after story” of Christmas, that is rarely included in the dramatic telling of this annual narration. Within the last few days, many of us heard the nativity story, though perhaps in an online or socially distanced way that we previously never could have imagined for Christmas worship. Yet I am guessing that however we heard that familiar story this year, it stopped with the scene of baby Jesus in the manger surrounded by angels declaring, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those who he favors.” Perhaps “Silent Night” was sung – but rather than being bathed in the candle glow from a sanctuary filled with people, it was sung at home with just our families gathered around a candle-filled Advent wreath.

Regardless of what our Christmas celebrations were like a few days ago, we have 10 more days to rejoice in the gift of Emmanuel. God with us. Today’s readings remind us that there is more to share about the birth and purpose of Jesus in the world than simply the nativity scene. In Luke 2, we hear some elements of Jesus’ storyline that are not present in Mark, Matthew, or John. This account of his early visit to the temple not only portrays Mary and Joseph as people of Israel, but the circumcision and presentation of Jesus at the temple leaves no question that Jesus

is an observant Jew, even from birth. Simeon and Anna are characters known only to Luke's gospel, which highlight the long-awaited prophecy that has now been fulfilled in Jesus. Their encounter with baby Jesus in the temple help to introduce a new sense of anticipation and excitement into the story of Jesus, as the narration shifts from the various angelic announcements and the birth of Jesus, to a foreshadowing of what this baby will one day do. In the words of Simeon to Mary, Jesus is "destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed" (Luke 2:34).

This song of praise to God by Simeon is an odd one to be sung in front of these new parents, as it is essentially a song about Simeon's own death now that he has seen their son. And then in his final blessing to Mary, he says that a sword will pierce her own heart too. Even at this early stage of Jesus' life, we see how glory and anguish, beauty and sorrow, gladness and opposition, are contained in this one child. When God came down to earth – Jesus experienced the whole breadth of human life – joys and sorrows – all that is wonderful and difficult. God came to be Emmanuel – God with us – not just for Christmas day, or the for the 12 days of the season, but for every day of our life – throughout the ups and downs, our hopes and fears, successes and disappointments, accomplishments and failures – all of it.

God could have used some other medium to enter into the world. God's self-revelation could have taken on any form. However, God chose to use the same form that was created by God so many years ago. It was through human flesh that God reached out to the world. When this exchange happened between divine and human, something new took place. The ordinary physical realities of our bodies took on a new potential, because God has become incarnate among us. God appeared in the mundane, the common everyday stuff, that makes up every one of us. As this time of year has us focusing on God coming down to earth as a human, it reminds me of a story I read a few years ago:

One snowy Christmas Eve, a farmer's wife was taking their children to a Christmas Eve service in the farm community in which they lived.

She asked him to come, but he refused. "That Christmas story is nonsense!" he said "Why would God lower Himself to come to Earth as a man? That's just ridiculous!"

So, she and the children left, and he stayed home. A while later, the winds grew stronger and the snow turned into a blizzard. As the man looked out the window, all he saw was a blinding snowstorm.

No sooner had he sat down to relax before the fire for the evening, when he heard a loud thump. Something had hit the window. Then there was another thump. He looked out, but couldn't see more than a few feet. When the snow let up a little later, he ventured outside to see what could have been beating on his window.

In the field near his house, he saw a flock of wild geese. Apparently, they had been flying south for the winter when they got caught in the snowstorm and could not go on. They were lost and stranded on his farm with no food or shelter. They were flapping their wings and flying around the field in low circles, blindly with no direction. A couple of them had gotten off track and flown into his window.

The farmer felt sorry for the geese and wanted to help them. He knew his barn would be a great place for them to stay. It is warm and safe, and they could spend the night there to wait out the storm. The farmer walked over to the barn and opened the doors wide, then watched and waited, hoping the geese would notice the open barn and go inside.

But the geese just fluttered around aimlessly and did not seem to notice the barn or realize what it could mean for them. The farmer tried to get their attention, but that just seemed to scare them, and they moved further away. He went into the house and came back out with some bread, broke it up, and made a breadcrumbs trail leading to the barn. They still didn't catch on.

Now he was getting frustrated. He got behind them and tried to shoo them toward the barn, but they only got more scared and scattered in every direction except toward the barn. Nothing he did could get them to go into the barn where they would be warm and safe.

"Why don't they follow me?" he exclaimed. "Can't they see this is the only place where they can survive the storm?" He thought for a moment and realized that they just wouldn't follow a human. "If only I were a goose, then I could save them," he said out loud.

Then he had an idea. He went into barn, got one of his own geese, and carried it in his arms as he circled around behind the flock of wild geese. He then released it.

His goose flew through the flock and straight into the barn, and one by one the other geese followed it to safety.

He stood silently for a moment as the words he had spoken a few minutes earlier replayed in his mind: "If only I were a goose, then I could save them!"

Then he thought about what he had said to his wife earlier. "Why would God want to be like us? That's ridiculous!" Suddenly it all made sense. That is what God had done. We were like the geese – blind, lost, perishing. God sent His Son to become like us, so He could show the way and save us.

Simeon and Anna knew that God's salvation story included a Messiah who would be the redemption of Israel, the glory of God's people – the one to save us. Their messages and witness to God at work in the world demonstrate once again that God uses ordinary, everyday people and things to share the good news – simple things such as bread, wine and water. The story of Jesus' birth and early life in Luke makes room for a variety of messengers and avenues for the gospel message. It makes room for women and men. It makes room youth and elders. It makes room for the poor, disappointed, marginalized and unsuspecting. The good news of Jesus' birth is something that we can all share as we carry the good news of God's salvation, liberation, acceptance to those around us.

As we prepare to enter into a new year, the good news of Christmas that we carry is that regardless of what 2021 may bring, we can be confident in Emmanuel: A God who came as one of us, and continues to keep God's promises, that indeed God is still walking with us as we are equipped, encouraged and empowered by the Holy Spirit. God is with us – every single day of our lives – throughout all of life's ups and downs – granting us peace and confidence to face the new year and each day, and leading us to thanksgiving for all God has done...and is still doing...to us, with us, and through us. Thanks be to God. Amen.