

With such a familiar story as this, it can be hard to hear anything new in it. But tonight, we're not looking for something new, we're looking for something true. The way St. Luke tells this story can help us to see beyond the details of the manger and the shepherds and the swaddling cloths and the angels to what is deeply true about it.

Anyone in Luke's original audience, hearing this story for the first time, would have expected it to begin with a king. If not Caesar Augustus, the King of the World, then Herod, the King of Judea, or at least Joseph, some distant heir to the throne of Israel. And if not a king, then at least a priest, God's representative on earth. In fact, Luke's story does begin with a priest, but he doesn't even believe what the angel comes to tell him, and the story of the priest's son is not the story we read tonight.

Instead, our story begins by acknowledging what Caesar is doing and then directing our attention elsewhere. Luke then tells us about an ordinary woman, engaged to an ordinary man, doing what everybody else in the world are doing: obeying the King. They travel from one ordinary town to another, where a baby comes into the world in a very ordinary way. The whole thing is as miraculous as what takes place in the maternity ward at St. Joes a dozen times a day; which is to say that it is miraculous, but not to the extent that anyone would want to tell a story about it. He brings us to this story in the dark, unable to see what he wants us to see.

When I was a camp counselor at Bible camp, we used to take the kids on night hikes. There are things you can only see at night, oddly enough, when it's hard to see. For example, at night, you can find your blind spot. Everybody has one: in each eye, there is a part of your retina where your optic nerve attaches that is completely devoid of light-sensing cells. This should cause a hole in your vision—but it doesn't. Instead, your brain interpolates what should be there and fills in the hole. In other words, you see in that spot what you expect to see.

It's next to impossible to find this blind spot during the day. There are tricks to do it, but it's awfully hard to accomplish. Your brain is too good at filling in the missing information. But on a clear night, if you look up at the sky and find a modestly bright star, you can watch it wink in and out of existence as you look directly at it or a few degrees away. In the dark, you can see your blind spot.

I wonder if Luke tells us this story in this way to help us see our own blind spot. We come to this story with expectations, just like those first readers and hearers did. We come expecting to find what we already know to be true, expecting to have our suspicions confirmed. I wonder if Luke sets this story in the dark—both literally and metaphorically—so that rather than relying on our brains to supply the missing details, we have to look deeper to see where God has been hidden in this story. We know to look for God in the manger, in the tiny child, but as we stare at that detail, what else might we be missing? Where else might God be hiding in this story?

In the darkness of the world that obscures God from our sight, Luke hopes for this story to be a ray of light, illuminating the way forward for us, a flashlight beam directing us to find God. But sometimes, light can be too dim to see except in the darkness. One of the other things we used to do on night hikes was hand out wint-o-green Lifesavers. We'd have the kids peel back their lips and dry their mouths out and crunch on the candies while they looked at a partner. The sudden shock causes a tiny chemiluminescent reaction between the wintergreen flavoring and the sugar; but the light is too dim to see during the day. You can only see it at night, in the dark. Maybe the same is true of Luke's story; maybe the light of God's truth is so subtle, so mysterious that we have to first venture into the dark of this story to see it.

As odd as it seems, God chooses to be hidden in stories like this one and in people like these in order to be revealed. As people who spend all our time in the light, this doesn't make sense: if God wants to be found, why not just come out in the open? Why not send us some proof or some sign that God exists and tell us why

everything works the way it does? Instead, the only sign we get is a baby swaddled and laid in a manger. We know that's where God is in this story, but where *else* is God hidden? Where else do you see God in this story?

One thing I notice is that, while Caesar conducts his registration for his own reasons—reasons which include first and foremost taxation and military conscription—he accidentally stumbles into helping fulfill a prophecy by creating the circumstances for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, rather than Nazareth. Luke goes to great pains to point out that God is at work among these lowly people: shepherds, townspeople, a carpenter and his fiancée; but at the same time, even the mighty Caesar, acting in total ignorance of all that is happening, is doing God's work.

It helps me to see that God is not just in the baby lying in the manger, but in the flesh of humanity—all humanity. The baby is the proof, not the exception. God chooses to be hidden in flesh—our flesh. Luke's readers already assume God is at work in the mighty and powerful and wealthy; so Luke directs their attention to the lowly and marginalized and dispossessed to show them that, here, too, God is present, physically as well as spiritually.

That means that our flesh—the very stuff that makes us weak and embodies all our faults and failures and ugliness—is also the stuff that embodies God. More often than not, we call our flesh dirty and sinful; but how can we call it that when God chooses to dwell there? By taking on our flesh, God is transforming it from something base and shameful, something that must be beaten into submission by supposedly divinely elected rulers, into something that is holy and sacred and capable of carrying the salvation of the entire world.

13th century mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, “The Eternal Birth [of Christ] must take place in you.” This isn't a command, but a truth: Christ is not Christ unless he is born in us, as well. In the miracle of the Incarnation, our flesh becomes his flesh. He is hidden in us in order to be revealed to the world. We are free to oppose, to

resist, or to ignore this birth, but just like Caesar, God's will is done with or without our cooperation. If we should wish to seek God, however, we may find that rather than being shut up in some far-away heaven, God is as close to us as our very own flesh.

Look around you; apart from the baby in the manger, where can you see God? Where is God hidden in the darkness and the mundanity of this world, waiting to be revealed? Where have you encountered God without even knowing it? Where has God been at work right under your very nose? St. Luke has an idea. It's not just in the places we would expect to find God—churches and priests and powerful leaders—but in even in the last, the least, the littlest, and the lost. The light of God shines even within you, revealing God's love to the world. Can you see it?