



Sunday Sermon
December 25, 2025
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

Christmas Day

Luke 2: 1-20

*Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. **AMEN.***

The sun has been up for a while. There is still a bit of chill in the desert air. As people move through the narrow city streets, they buy olives and bread from the venders. It seems like a normal morning, but there is an odd buzz going about mixed idle chatter.

For in the night, a child was born in the city of Bethlehem. He was born in that dank and dark cave that Benjamin, the son of Eli, uses as a stable off his paddock - you know, just past the olive grove. Many saw the man and woman coming into town at dusk. It is said that they were travelers who came from the far north region of Galilee. Word is that they have kin here, but no one took them in. Someone said that the poor woman's water broke just as she road into town on that tired old donkey.

None of this is overly surprising. After all, women give birth all the time - often ill-timed and in inconvenient places. It is what happened later in the night that has everyone talking. Those shepherds came to town. Yes, those crazy shepherds came looking for the newborn, covered in dust and dung. And that motley crew claimed to have heard from an angel. Now that has people talking.

If we could be transported to the Bethlehem of Jesus' birth, in the first hours of the morning of that first day of a new epoch, this might have been all that we would have heard - tellings of strange claims. But it would not be too long before life in Bethlehem would have gotten back to normal. Only Mary, it seems, held on to what she had seen, felt and heard, that is as she "treasured all those words and pondered them in her heart."

Today, on this sacred ground, half a planet away, not in a dank grotto stable but in this warm sanctuary, we hear the story of a King's birth. We know the story line so well. Our carols give it a gloss of the spectacular and aura of the miraculous with angels singing "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

But it was really very simple, common and crude. It was a messy birth in a dirty cave. Later generations may show Mary in fine robes and will note Joseph's Davidic, royal pedigree. But the truth is Mary is God's lowly servant; Joseph is probably seen by many as an old man - on the downside of life. And they are poor. In Luke's story, no magi came, just poor shepherds. Perhaps as some New Testament scholars have suggested, they were not really bid by angels to come but rather this cave was their stable.

And yet, in this lowly and all but pathetic beginning of Jesus' life we receive the most profound lesson of God and of the Incarnation - that is God becoming enfleshed in Jesus. It is the lesson of the stable cave. Our God is a God who descends. God descends from divine to human. As Paul wrote to the Philippian Church of this descending God, who, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." Beginning in a cave, Jesus is the God made man who descends. And his first visitors, however beckoned and for whatever reason, are these shepherds. It is these dirt-poor sheep farmers who come and visit. Jesus in infancy is in the company that he prefers—the poor and the lowly.

If you go today to what is believed to be the actual stable cave of the nativity in Bethlehem, you will find over the cave the Basilica of the Nativity and the adjoining Church of St. Catherine. To come to the spot of the birth, the pilgrim must descend - into the remnant cave. There in the candlelight and semi-darkness is an altar marking the revered place of Jesus' birth. And under an ornate altar within the marble floor, there is a silver star in the center with these words, *Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus Natus est*. Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary. Here! In a cave, it all began. Here is the place where God descended to become man. And so the angels sing.

And over the arch of time, through two millennia, generations upon generations have remembered that time and that place, what the shepherds heard. Mary took it all in and pondered. In her lifetime, she came to understand the fullness of the meaning of the angelic proclamation delivered to her by shepherds. It would take another descent into another cave - the cave of death and resurrection - before it would all make sense. This descending God meant to take it all - birth, life and death, and then teach all humankind that death is not the end of the story. Irenaeus, an early bishop of the church, saw the Incarnation as the perfecting moment of God's love. He wrote, "Because of his boundless love, Jesus became what we are, that he might make us to be what he is."

And here too, the sun has been up a bit. We see a few people driving down Sunshine Coast Highway. In the shelters, people are stirring. Some crawl out of their tents damp and cold. Many gifts of charity have been received - thank God - but for too many the day is empty and a bit scary. Where are the shepherds? Are they coming into town to tell the message of angels? Listen? Do you hear anything?

What do those angels look like? What do they sound like? Maybe Billy Collins had it right when he wrote this verse in his poem, *Questions about Angels*:

If an angel delivered the mail would he arrive
in a blinding rush of wings or would he just assume
the appearance of the regular mailman and
whistle up the driveway reading the postcards? (1)

The gospel truth is this: the God who descended in Jesus Christ once upon a time makes that descent - that daily visitation - even still on this Christmas Day, lo even on any and every day.

Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus Natus est. Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary. *Hic Jesus Christus nobis natus est*. Here Jesus Christ is born within us. We live into that mystery when we draw near in the sacramental meal of Eucharist, fed and becoming the Body of Christ—Jesus' hands and feet in the world.

Hic Jesus Christus nobis natus est. Here Jesus Christ is born within us, when we find those who are poor and suffering and give them new life through simple human dignity as well as bread for living. *Hic Jesus Christus nobis natus est.* Here Jesus Christ is born within us, when we are a voice for the voiceless and hope for the hopeless.

Today, we celebrate the birth of Jesus, once upon a time in Bethlehem. Let us also celebrate the birth of Jesus today. Let us bind ourselves together as Jesus today, *hic*, here. Let the angel shout the joyful news. Because of love, everything is changing. Peace be upon you. God has become human so that you may enter the fellowship of God. God is with us. God is with the poor so that the poor may be rich. Indeed, God is with the rich so that they may be like Christ and by being at one with the poor so find God. And so, let us be like those shepherds who, listening to the angel, go to a lowly place and find in descending our greatest riches. Yes, God is with us. Alleluia. Come let us adore him!

(1) Billy Collins, *Questions about Angels* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999).