

1st Sunday after Christmas

Sermon 12.31.17

Scripture: Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Luke 2:22-40

I used to love Christmas. I used to love the moment in early December when we could finally break out the decorations—a little wooden winter scene that I'd set up on a living room side table, and a little carved crèche set that I'd set up on the other living room side table. I used to love it when finally came the time for us four Rogers to head out to a friend's back woods to choose a tree. I used to love it when my mom unfurled the Christmas tablecloth across the dining room table. My grandparents' mint-green Buick Royal at last in the driveway might as well have been Santa's sleigh, the sign now Christmas was really upon us.

I used to love the candlelight service of Christmas Eve best of any service all year long. The familiar beauty of it was as precious as a flickering candle too soon blown to smoke. And the words of the story were the most beloved to me of all the boring readings from the Bible I'd hear the rest of the year through. These were boring, too, but certainly less so.

I came to know, of course, that Christmas isn't so beloved a holiday to lots of people. Even in my own family, Christmas had become hitched to heartbreak. My grandmother's coming, so happy-making to me, got my mom anxious, worried that she'd discover her to have been drinking again, and my grandfather's annual coming had us on a steady march into his slow-encroaching dementia, until it wasn't so slow.

I think the fact that Christmas comes every year, the same every year (same story, same songs), casts in full relief all the ways in which the little worlds around us are always changing, the people around us, once grown, now begun their aging, decaying. This embodied life has its insistent downsides.

What's more, that it's a holiday all about your deepest hopes being called out, their fulfillment being promised, foretold: it's one big setup for disappointment. Our deepest hopes, after all, aren't fulfilled, haven't been fulfilled even though Christmas has, once again, come. Really, I was told I'd be getting peace and goodwill toward all people this year, but what I really got were some white t-shirts from Eddie Bauer.

Christmas isn't magical in the way we tend to think of magic. It doesn't solve all our problems. In fact, it might make us all the more aware of our problems.

It wasn't this dawning fact, though, that had my love of Christmas grow less urgent. It was the fact that I became a pastor. It was my doubling-down on the rest of the year that made Christmas seem less pointed and exceptional.

The Christmas readings, both those we hear on Christmas Eve, and those we hear throughout the short season of Christmas (which can be as many as two Sundays, but this year is just one, *this morning*), are apologia. This is what biblical scholarship would have us know, that the nativity and childhood narratives about Jesus are apologetic in aim, written to underscore the assertion that Jesus is the Messiah. The details of the story—the angels and shepherds, the magi and the wandering star, the return to Bethlehem of Joseph and his betrothed, a very pregnant Mary: these were all to point to the confession of faith that Jesus is the one long-promised, born of the house of David to be a king, though greater even than the greatest king. The King of kings. The Lord of lords.

That Jesus, this otherwise unremarkable baby, is the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one of God; that Jesus is the one in whom there is redemption and salvation, the one in whom God comes to us to abide with us: this majestic claim about, and understanding of, Jesus is something that was written back into his story. First revealed at the end of his life, following his death, at his resurrection, it was first then wrested into understanding (as far as we know) by the Apostle Paul. Some twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus, Paul focused not on Jesus' life and teachings, and certainly not his infancy or birth, but on just this, his resurrection—what it might mean both *about* Jesus and as regards us, those who believe, those who don't, really all of creation.

Only later did the life of Jesus become of interest in any formal sense, which had the gospel writers writing down the stories they'd been told, writing them down lest they be lost to history.

This was itself a new concern. History: this hadn't been much of a consideration for most of the 1st century Christians because they assumed it would be short. Really, they'd taken it as given that it would all come to an end soon. Christ's having come, having died, and having been raised: this whole event suggested that things were all coming to an end. Not only a rupture in history, the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit, come to conceive a child and then to resurrect that same one following his having been killed: this was thought, more than a rupture, to be a conclusion. History's aim revealed, the creation's purpose and end made now: resurrection for this one meant imminent resurrection to a new creation for all, or at least for all believers.

So, whatever stories there were to tell in order to understand this whole bizarre, wondrous, frightening event wouldn't have had to be told for long. No, for any moment now the earth would be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. So, gone would be the need to teach such knowledge, gone would be the need to tell the stories of God-with-us, because that state would be the all in all. And if there'd only shortly be a need to teach and tell these stories, there was still less of a need to write them down. I mean, it wasn't as if they'd have to secure a means for passing them down, generation to generation—because there wouldn't be many more generations, or really *any* more generations.

Right?

The delay, then, in this overwhelming fulfillment, the delay in this so-called *parousia*, this “being present,” cast the task of these early Christians in a new light. This would be a long game; this walking in the way of Christ would be a decades long game, or generations long, or centuries or even millennia long.

We're still going.

So, as history ahead of them stretched out long, history past did too—back into the life and ministry of Jesus, back into the childhood and infancy of Jesus, back into the conception and birth, and then into his preconception, his preexistence. Mark, the earliest gospel narrative, charts the beginning for the gospel of Jesus Christ at his baptism, when he was a, though young, adult. Matthew and Luke, two later gospels, chart the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ at his conception and birth. John, the latest of our canonical gospels, charts that beginning at the beginning, when God began to create, when with God but dwelt only the word—the word which was God and was with God, and which became flesh and dwelt among us in the fullness of time.

The question as to when it began grew longer into the past as the question as to when it would end stretched longer into an unknown future—all of which is to say, this morning at least, that the infancy narratives, which give us Christmas, were later additions to the story, and were therefore quite likely constructions separate from how it all “actually happened.”

But maybe not, of course. Maybe these details are remembered as they're remembered because they're factual, because they were actual. Maybe there really were, in that region, shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night when an angel of the Lord appeared to them and said, “Fear not, for, lo, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people.”

Maybe there really were magi from the east who came having followed a new star in the sky. I'm certainly willing to hold those details as possible actualities.

But I'm also willing to hold them as details of a story included to suggest something true that is somewhat other from fact.

Really, the assertion about the magi is less important to me in its actuality than it is in what it suggests: that the event of God-with-us, incarnate, is something so grand it draws in the whole world, not only the Jews who knew the promise of the Messiah from the scriptures that some spent their lifetimes studying, but also the Gentiles whose way of wisdom was in studying the night sky, the stars, the creation around us all. That to understand the profound majesty, and to plumb the great mystery, of God incarnate, you need to compile all the world's wisdom and gather in all the world's peoples with all their hopes and fears and insights and faiths: this is the truth that proves itself true every time I venture to test it, whether or not the magi, whose inclusion in the story suggests it, were there in an actual stable in actual fact.

Likewise, the assertion about the shepherds and the encounter they're said to have had with an angel of the Lord. It's less important to me in its actuality than it is in what it suggests: that this coming one more urgently wants the company of the lowly of the world than the company of the rulers, the rich, the royal—and because the lowly of the world might well be open, eager, for the transformation of the world that the Christ brings about. The view from below, Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it. That indeed the political machinations of empires and their emperors, and the cynical aims of tetrarchs who'll spill innocent blood in order to hold on to their power, all come to nothing when God's aim is to come to us and abide with us and utterly transform our way of being in the world: this is a truth that has proven itself true time and again throughout history such that the likelihood that these shepherds find themselves in the gospel narrative more as emblem than as fact matters to me not at all.

Same with the assertion about Jesus having been conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin: the technical aspects of how this could be are less important to me than what this confession implies—that in and by and through and with Jesus, God interrupts history, disrupts the dread inheritance of sin which one generation passes on to the next, and opens a way for grace by which we might be freed or at least by which we might imagine so radically being freed. The sin that clings so closely—the personal sin of our stalwart compulsion to put our own needs ahead of anyone else's needs, the structural sin on which every social order builds itself up: that this tangled

mess might be disrupted by grace is what Mary said yes to in that storied encounter, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be with me just as you’ve said.” Likewise, this is what we might all say yes to, whether or not Luke’s reportage of the encounter meets the journalistic standards of our day.

So the gospel writers wrote these things down, rich with suggestive details that point to the truth, which would simply have to endure from generation to generation because, apparently, there would be generation after generation.

This morning’s reading is a continuation of the infancy narratives as apologia, as underscoring an assertion. That this baby is the Messiah, that the one whom we’d know as Christ in his resurrection was also Christ in his living, which meant he was Christ even as a baby, which some particularly wise people recognized. Simeon recognized it, he who was promised he wouldn’t die before seeing the Lord’s Messiah; and Anna recognized it, she who was a prophet and would therefore go on to testify to it, speaking about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. These are the foundational details and encounters that justify the whole world’s coming round to see that something astounding happened in the life of Jesus. And it all started here.

But that’s just it: it only *started* here. As lovely as Christmas is—its pleasing details and lovely touches—it’s only the start. What’s more, with its focus on *who* Jesus was and *how* he came to be, it says nearly nothing about what we’re to do in response to it all. Really, this story as it begins might be thought to have nearly no implications for us, might be thought not to implicate us in any way at all.

And maybe this is why our wider culture has so thoroughly embraced it, and then deployed it for its own purposes. I mean, it’s a sweet story. Trumped up “War on Christmas” aside, this is all quite non-threatening. Sure, we might not want a crèche set up on the public school playground, but no one argues with the scenario itself—that is, unless and until it lays some claim on us. But that doesn’t really come until later.

The fact that you’re here this morning suggests to me that you’re in it for that claim laid upon you, that implication drawing you in and convicting you in some truth to which you mean to answer. The fact that you’re here on this Sunday after Christmas suggests that, whatever sweet thing might have whet your appetite on Christmas Eve, proved not to be enough for you. You want more.

Or maybe that's just me. Maybe it's just me who used to love Christmas and now experiences it as but the beginning, an amuse-bouche prior to a meal whose fullness is yet to come.

When I was a kid, everything went under the tree. My mom used to begin buying gifts for my sister and me, or making them, seamstress that she was, in early January, and always with the mantra, "Everything goes under the tree." We rarely got new things at other times during the year, with the exception of birthdays and during back-to-school shopping. Otherwise, everything went under the tree. I got ski socks, bed sheets, cans of black olives, all in my stocking or under the tree. I got a Baby Beans doll, a Holly Hobby decoupage purse, a pair of orange corduroy knickers, a double-cassette deck radio, all under the tree.

And, regarding as I do my childhood as a pretty good one, I've used it as a touchstone when it comes to my kids. I tend to do for them what was done for me because what was done for me was pretty good.

But I've noticed this shift. The Goodman boys don't receive a gush of gifts on Christmas morning anymore and little else the rest of the year. It's more evenly spread out. Those sweet surprises of a new pair of sneakers for Tobias, a jar of strawberry jam for Jack, or a fidget spinner, or a LEGO mini-fig; they could come at any time. Really, I noticed that this year I'm less inclined to do glut and dearth giving, more inclined to give as the thought occurs or the need arises or the happenstance presents itself. And I've wondered if this reflects a change in my experience of being given gifts.

I used to love Christmas. Then I became a pastor and realized that the glories of Christmas, its outlandish promises and highest hopes, its clinging dreads and confessed fears, its tenderness and rough hews, really don't have to end with the candles blown out. In fact, with that they've only barely begun. We haven't even yet shown up in the story. Lagging behind even the magi, we are yet to arrive.

Christmas would have us know that Jesus is but a baby while also something other than but a baby. He is the fulfillment of ancient promises and an intruder into history where we'd otherwise happily go along to get along. He is the hope of the lowliest of the world and the fear of the greatest whose hold on power is their greatest pleasure. He is the king of kings whose realm knows no limit because it grows by the appeal of love. He is the one whom we'd be wise to follow. But Christmas wouldn't have us know much about ourselves except that we ought to come and worship.

Having done that, many will decide that's enough for them. Not me, though, and perhaps not you. The church year unfurls itself, and what delights Christmas might have presented us are but the beginning. Tomorrow begins a new year in a way other than by the calendar. Consider resolving with me to follow in the way that the candles of Christmas Eve might become an everlasting light.

Thanks be to God.