

December 24, 2020

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Reading: Luke 2.1-7

The Message: The Lord is Come! Incarnate Joy

Video

What is it about this story that creates this hush, this magical moment for us?

Is it the simple, surprisingly powerful story of a young woman giving birth, attended only by shepherds and animals but heralded by angels? Is it that we listen to a story told for centuries?

It's a story that really shouldn't have been noticed let alone remembered. Thousands of young girls gave birth that night – we don't remember them.

The story opens:

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus ... while Quirinius was governor"

It sounds like it will be a big story: emperors and governors are the subject of dramatic narratives – stories for the history books. Surely God will work a great work through them. History books will be full of the great works of these two men.

Unwed mothers from insignificant towns and vulnerable babies ... not so much.

The writer of the story couples these strikingly different characters: the powerful and the vulnerable.

In a way, it's ironic. For this vulnerable baby born out of wedlock to a child mother will change history and the lives of the powerful hang in the balance.

How outrageous to set newborn baby next to emperor. Yet that is part of what entrances us.

Few of us have experience of miracles, but we can all identify with an infant. Vulnerability, fear and hope in a new mother's heart. These are emotions we know. We come to the story with our own vulnerability, our own fears, our own hopes.

- Do you come worried about a relationship, anxious about finances,
- fearful of the safety or wellbeing of a loved one,
- overburdened by caring for a parent or child?

We have all been branded by the difficulties of life and so we can identify with the frailties of the characters in this story. We feel for them, and each time we hear the story, we are surprised, humbled, encouraged to hear God's promise coming to fruition through them for us.

We are like the shepherds, who have no hope of being touched by the divine, so terrified by the host of angels that they have no choice but to go see what is happening. And of course they tell the story, because it is such a hope-filled story.

What a story! God chooses to dwell in a baby not an emperor. God chooses to work through an infant not a governor.

God's intentions for human beings will become known amid the weakness and vulnerability of human birth. God's love takes human form – becoming, not in this instance powerful – but rather weak.

Even when we live in the most comfortable of surroundings, we share in the loss of loved ones, in the severing of relationships, in the pain and suffering that are an inevitable part of every human life.

If we were to write the story, we would have someone powerful DO SOMETHING about all that. Wipe it away. But this story, this Christmas story, points instead beyond pain, beyond suffering to the joy that lies at the very heart and centre of life:

God's joy can be experienced right here, right now, in the hush of this story. It is right here on earth that God's joy can be experienced most powerfully and directly.

The genius of this story is that this love in human weakness, channelled through a young mother and weary father, through a gang of shepherds, in a common barn next to sleepy stable animals; this love in human weakness causes us to hope, to believe that this divine love can be found in us. This is our story, and it is our lives to which God is committed.

This hush we feel when we hear the story each Christmas Eve, this tugging at our heart strings, is not just a story about Mary and Joseph, shepherds and angels, a crying baby. It's a story about us, apart but not alone, amid candles and carols, prayers and solos. As God entered into Mary, God might enter into our lives as well. Emmanuel: God with us!