

# **Christmas Eve ~ We Tell This Story**

**Luke 2:1-20**

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Stories teach us, shape us, strengthen us. Throughout Advent we've heard stories. Stories of God shaping generations before us, stories of a God who shows up when we're afraid and sends others into our lives so that with God and other people around us, fear loses its power, stories that help us choose God's way of love. Tonight, we tell another story but it's not just any story. It's the story of God coming into our world, the story of God with us in the Christ child who grows up to show us just how much God loves us.

We tell this story of Christ's birth, because it captivates us, because it shows us how far our God will go to draw near to us and be in relationship with us. We tell this story because it reveals to us what love looks like – our Creator, the Creator of all things, taking on frail human flesh to say, “This is how much I love you. I choose to become one of you. I choose to enter the messy joy that is human life. The complexity and pain and sorrow that is human life. I am with you and for you. Always.” And in his life, Jesus showed us how we're called to be as well, in relationship with other people and for other people. Human life wasn't always easy for him and it is not easy for us. Human life continues to be complex – messy, joyful, painful – all wrapped up together. At their best, our Christmas celebrations don't allow us to forget the complexity of human life, but to embrace it with God.

How we tell the story of Jesus' birth matters too, the details of the story matter. I'm not the first pastor to say that we've sanitized this story. We've made it about a pious and faithful couple and their cooing little baby. We've romanticized it with shepherds under a star filled sky and exotic wise men come from afar. And that's okay for children's pageants and Hallmark movies, we need those sometimes. But we can't leave it there. The details of the whole story tell it differently. The details tell of a powerful empire which can force its citizens to move around and be counted at a moment's notice no matter how inconvenient. They tell of a king who was so afraid of losing power that he seeks to slaughter even the innocent to protect himself. The details tell of a God who enters human history not in these powerful people but through the lives of people who are poor, marginalized, and part of those being oppressed. Mary is a teenager, her husband a carpenter. Together they're a poor couple who give two doves as an offering for their

son, the offering of paupers. The details tell of a baby, called the Son of God, in direct challenge to the power of the Roman Emperor who first considered *himself* to be the Son of God.

These details matter. They help us understand that God is about being present to all human beings, you, me, our neighbors, but God is also about challenging the oppressive systems created by human beings. The systems that financially exploit the poor and vulnerable. The systems that favor one race over another, one gender over another, one way of loving over another. The systems which insist that violence is the only way to solve our problems. These details remind us that Jesus didn't come to start a new religion nor only to ensure our salvation; he came to begin a revolution based on a renewed understanding of what God's love looks like. In the face of those who seek to dominate through violence and fomenting fear, God comes with the power of love to lift up a different way. The details of the story matter because without them we risk misunderstanding that yes! God is for me, for you, for us, but we're also called to be *for God* by being especially present to those who are not favored by the powerful.

This is the story we tell tonight, but we need not, we can't, *limit* our telling to this one night. We can tell this story every day with the way we live our lives. And just like God is present to us as individuals and in challenging oppressive systems, we can tell the story in both ways too, offering aid in personal ways and advocating for systemic change.

I've been privileged to witness this story being told in different ways throughout this Advent season. Many of you know that our Presbytery, the group of Presbyterian church in this area, has a relationship with the Presbyterian churches in Honduras. I've been able to travel to Honduras many times and work in partnership with leaders in the church there. A few years ago the Presbyterian Women of Honduras wanted to start a retreat center for the church there and for American groups who come to Honduras to serve. With the help of Presbyterian Women in the United States, they bought a property and have been capably running a church retreat center ever since. Recently, in a monthly conference call that I moderate for our partnership, the church in Honduras said that they've begun using the retreat center in a different way. Like our country, Honduras is experiencing an influx of refugees and while they're in the country, even if they are merely passing through, they often need aid and shelter. The Presbyterian Women decided that they would like to work with another agency and make the retreat center available to those refugees, especially to families.

It may surprise you to hear that it was a controversial decision. Migration is a difficult issue for governments and NGOs in all countries, not just this one. Moreover, human beings are much the same across cultures and some in the Church in Honduras said, "It's our space. We need it for our activity!" But they had the conversation within and between all the churches that support the retreat center. They discussed what it looks like to serve Jesus and how the way he came into the world and the way he lived calls them to love their neighbor especially when it's difficult and demanding. Mary and Joseph were in a sense, refugees, forced to leave their home, and the church chose in the end to make space for others who are also refugees. Some of the Americans

on the conference call said, “That’s wonderful! But what about when we come down? Will they be there then too?” “Well only if you’re lucky enough to cross paths with them.” Was the beautiful answer we got. How would our conversations about migration and refugees, about opening up our spaces, look different if we looked at it through the lens of the story of Christ’s birth?

Or what about our connection to those who are experiencing homelessness? This weekend’s frigid temperatures brought leaders from the city, county, churches, and aid agencies together to make sure that there were spaces for those who are homeless to keep warm during the days. That’s not always the case on the weekends and especially not on holiday weekends. Many of those leaders and other volunteers are giving of their own time today and tomorrow for staffing to keep space open. Our church is also participating by extending our normal morning weekend hours. It’s important to act in these particular ways, but the story of Jesus’ birth also prompts us to keep asking and working on systemic questions, “why are there so many people experiencing homelessness? What more can we do to address the systematic issues?”

As we ask difficult questions and choose to be present in difficult situations, the story we tell this night reminds us that God goes with us and before us through it all. And in our individual lives God goes with us and before us. When we’re seeking to be kind to our family members whose conversation around holiday dinner tables drives us crazy. God goes before us when we’re working to be in relationship with the neighbor whose political signs run opposite of ours every election season or when we’re encouraging stewardship of the earth in a consumer driven culture. God goes before us in love and shares the yoke of kindness with us. We do not do it alone.

We tell this story on this night, every year, because we need it to open up space in our hearts for our own stories to be shaped in Christ like ways. We need this story to give us enough hope to walk a little farther in the dark, to stretch toward the light that illumines and beckons us onward. Let us give voice and hands and feet and our whole selves to the light that is in the world, this night and every night. Amen.