

Year B  
Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.’

I confess to being a fan of Nativity scenes. From the time I can remember, I have seen the Holy Family in the stable on Christmas cards, in paintings, in creche scenes made of ceramic, or carved olive wood, felt, clay—really whatever people have available to make them out of. And I’ve enjoyed live Nativity scenes, too. When I was in high school our church performed the story in Luke’s Gospel every year on the lawn in front of the church, with real sheep, and a donkey for Mary to ride. In that little play, my dad narrated, and I played Mary; then, for the first time I got a small sense of how it might actually have been to ride a donkey to Bethlehem, and camp in a barn to have a baby.

Because we romanticize and normalize this amazing birth, don’t we? For centuries we’ve told the story, and created the images, and we are so used to it that we might find it hard to think about what it was actually like, and what it means. Even if you’ve never had a child, you might imagine what it might have been like for Mary to walk, or to ride a donkey, for the 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem when she was so close to term. To feel like a beached whale, with swollen ankles, and a sore back, wondering where the child would be born. And she would have been afraid, my friends. In spite of what the angel had told her, she would have been afraid, because many women died in childbirth during this time, and many babies died, as well. This entire journey would have been a time of fear for her, and for Joseph. For us, with sanitary birth facilities staffed by medical professionals, the idea of giving birth in a stable, with only Joseph to help is pretty unimaginable. Even for the first listeners of this story, it would have been pitiable and shocking. Mary should have been with her female relatives and a midwife for this event; Jewish men didn’t participate in childbirth at this time and place—that would have made them ritually unclean. So how shocking for God to become incarnate, to take on flesh AT ALL, much less to this poor, unmarried woman, camping out, giving birth with the help of only her fiancé. The Savior comes into the world in poverty and want of basic necessities, and Luke is making it clear that everything about this birth is irregular, different. Then Mary wraps her son up, and places him in a manger—a feeding box. Jesus is the bread of life, remember. Even from the very first his story points this out.

Then, to make things more amazing, Luke brings angels and shepherds into the story. Angels have already appeared to some of the people in the story, so it’s not completely unexpected—but it is wonderful. Most of the time, in Western art angels are depicted as beautiful, glowing figures, often female. If it’s a Victorian angel, she’ll have blonde curls and blue eyes. But the Bible describes them as huge, fearful, inhuman figures, with multiple wings, and many eyes. The first thing they usually say is “do not be afraid,” and for good reason—Luke says the shepherds were terrified. Imagine this huge, inhuman creature illuminated by “the glory of the Lord.” The sheep probably scattered everywhere, and the shepherds likely fell on their faces with fear. This first angel tells them about the coming of the savior, the Messiah—long-awaited. And this baby will

be the only one in Bethlehem “wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger” of course. Then the first angel is joined by “a multitude of the heavenly hosts, praising God.” So an uncountable number of these terrifying creatures, singing praise to God. Again not something for the faint of heart. How would you feel if you had been one of the shepherds?

And what about the shepherds? During the time and place that Luke was writing, shepherds were not highly thought of—they were of low social status, and considered kind of shiftless. But sending the angels first to the shepherds does two things: it is a reminder that Jesus is a descendant of King David, who was the shepherd king; and it is turning upside down any expectations that the Son of God is coming only for the rich and powerful.

Luke’s story is one that we think we are SO familiar with. This Christmas I invite you to sit with it, or sit with an image of the Holy Family, and think about what it must have been like to be there. And then rejoice that we have a Savior.

Amen

The Rev. Melanie K. Lewis