



God's Story, Our Story

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2019

Luke 2:1-14

Merry Christmas! Hey, even though it is completely respectful and appropriate when you are out and about to say “Happy Holidays” to everyone you meet, knowing that not everyone celebrates this particular holiday, here in church you can actually say the word Christmas, and so I say again to you, Merry Christmas! We are here to celebrate. We are here to remember an ancient story. Even though the story of Christmas is beautiful, and comforting, and traditional, we are not here to remember it for those reasons. There are a lot of stories in the world around us, and the truth is we tell a lot of stories about our own lives and about the world around us. There are the stories of news and fake news. There is the story of why the Vikings lost to the Packers last night. There are the stories of your families and the people you get along with and the people you don't get along with, and why that is true. There are the stories of those of us who do not have biological families. Each of you comes here with a story about who you are and how you came to be, and what God or the universe had to do with the way you've turned out up till now.

And in the middle of all those stories, all those different ways to explain what is, we are here to celebrate God's story. The way God tells the story, there were some incredibly powerful people in the world in the first century. There was Caesar Augustus, the son of Julius Caesar, who quite literally was called

the Son of God as John Bellarmine pointed out on Sunday. There are some incredibly powerful people in the world today, regardless what you think of them or how they use their power. And into a world in which the Roman Empire extended to vast reaches of the globe, God came to the smallest of people. God decided to show power, not through legislation or guns or elections or control, but precisely the opposite way. God became human as an illegitimate baby boy, and not even a midwife was there to help welcome him—just the animals.

When God became human, the people who got the news were shepherds. God sent angels, which are by definition God's messengers, not to Caesar or Herod or the chief priests, but to shepherds who were living without shelter in fields at night. And the message the angels brought to the shepherds was that God was coming to the world through a baby who was already called Savior. Before Jesus ever grew up and healed anyone or taught anything or proclaimed good news to anyone, and before he died and rose again, the fact of his birth was inherently saving. Jesus' birth means this: God is with us at our most powerless. And a better translation of the angels' message would be "Peace to humankind in whom God delights." God especially sent this message of God's delight to shepherds, who were the ancient equivalent of night janitors, or cowboys, or migrant farmers. If you are powerless, you are blessed. The birth of Jesus means that God's story always begins with you. If you are powerful and actually sick of it, sick of people treating you well not because of who you are but because of what they might be able to get out of you, you are blessed. God could care less what your title or family name is. God sees you as you actually are, which is that you are an imperfect person with gifts and challenges and vulnerabilities, and you too need to know that God shows up not as someone even more powerful than you, but as a tiny, vulnerable and beautiful baby, and God will meet you at the point of your vulnerability and need. If you have never in your life fit in socially, if you

have never had any standing or never learned the rules everyone else just seems to know automatically, you are blessed. God's good news comes directly to you that God delights in humankind. Not perfect humans, not good humans, not valuable humans—just humankind. If you are struggling with your repeated failures to figure stuff out, if you still haven't gotten consistent about cleaning your house or being on time or getting sober or being nice to your spouse, you are blessed. God came to people offering grace, forgiveness and new life, precisely when it is undeserved because grace by definition can never be earned.

The good news of God in Christ is that God came to smash all our notions of value and worth, to turn them upside down, as a matter of fact. God's story is the one we need to be reminded of, over and over again. God calls us to live into the alternative story we hear every year at Christmas. It's a story about accepting the presence and grace of God precisely where you are powerless. It's a story about recognizing that whatever power you do have can be offered to God for God's purposes in this world, which are always for healing and reconciliation and wholeness, especially beginning with those who have nothing as the world measures things.

Whatever joy you already have about Christmas, let it explode exponentially. Let us walk in the alternative story it tells about who we are and how God shows up among us. Let us be agents of God's Great Reversal, showing grace where it is not deserved, seeking and sharing our resources and power with those who have nothing, telling the good news that despair and vengeance and hatred will never have the last word. God is with us, and this is our story. Merry Christmas.