



Made in Goodness for Joy

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

December 24, 2021, Luke 2:1-14

Merry Christmas!

I'm so glad to see your shining faces—well, at least your eyes. Each of us has come here from different places and for different reasons. Whether you live alone or are celebrating with family and friends; whether you love Christmas or are too busy to notice; and especially for those of us who are grieving the absence of loved ones to celebrate with, regardless, here WE are, together, in person and online. Let's all say Merry Christmas to the people who are joining us remotely.

Tonight we remember a story that is two thousand years old. More or less, the story is that the Angel Gabriel came to a young unmarried teenage girl named Mary, and told her that God was blessing her to become the mother of one who would save his people. And so her son, Jesus, was born in a barn to her and to Joseph in ancient Palestine, occupied by the Roman Empire. Perhaps for many or even most of us, we accept this story without question as part of the tradition that brings us warmth and joy, along with Christmas carols and Christmas trees and big feasts and family and presents.

And every year we have a new opportunity to find out why or if this story matters to us, really, in the 21st century. At first glance, much of the story is hard to relate to. There are angels and shepherds and stars and dreams and a

virgin birth. Jesus is called a Savior, but I wonder if we might struggle with that concept as well. What are we being saved for or from? What is salvation in the first place? In this particular story it doesn't tell us. In other parts of the Bible we sometimes hear that Jesus came to save us from our sins. But in this story the angel doesn't mention sin.

Perhaps rather than begin with the big theology questions, we might simply enter into the story imaginatively and experience it from the inside. Right off, we see the joy that comes with a newborn baby, even one born in a barn. Have you all ever held a newborn? What we all immediately know about babies is that they are good, and precious beyond measure. And this is true of every baby ever born. You and I were also made in goodness. Our first reality, our first essence, is that we were made in the image of God, for joy and wonder. In the Bible's own creation story, God calls the entire created world, including us, good.

But it's hard to hold onto that original goodness. A lot of things camouflage or distort it. Many of our parents or caregivers weren't able to give us unconditional affirmation and delight, and so we learned shame and hiding or acting out. Racism and sexism and homophobia taught many of us that we were inferior or defective, and those wounds run deep. Those of us who have privilege like me, white people or men or straight folks who have only recently woken up to the vast harm inflicted on people of color and women and queer folks, feel enormous guilt over these things. And our own mistakes and self-absorption and suffering can make us not come from our best selves.

Now I can't believe this, but I'm actually about to quote Thomas Aquinas here. It's all Charles Taliaferro's fault. Aquinas said that salvation just meant "preserving the original goodness" of all people, all creatures. I believe Jesus

came not to save us from the condition of original sin, but to preserve and bring out our original goodness, our original blessing. This is why the Angel appeared first to shepherds and not to kings or people deemed important by the society of the time. I'm guessing the shepherds didn't experience the world treating them as good or worthy of being the first to know that God had sent a savior. But the Angel came to them all the same. These shepherds probably weren't scholars, and didn't know how to interpret the word "savior" according to their scriptures. But even if they understood nothing else the angel said, they did know what a manger was. They knew how to figure out where the sheep in Bethlehem would be. And so they knew how to find the baby Jesus, because the angel gave them a clue from their own ordinary lives. God was trying to meet them where they were. To you is born this day a Savior.

For me today the purpose of Jesus of Nazareth, and of the Christ consciousness who exists everywhere throughout time including right here and right now, is to preserve and bring out your inherent goodness, your original blessing. That is what salvation is. It's to heal us of that which prevents us from expressing who we really are at the core of our being. Then we can celebrate with the joy that's like what we feel when we hold a newborn baby. We can delight in the inherent light and goodness of ourselves and of all that exists. And when we see light in others, we will treat them with the dignity they deserve, whether they are just like us or radically different, whether they are human or animal or plant or rock.

And this is truly such good news that the entire host of heaven, those beings previously invisible to the shepherds but who were there all the time, couldn't stop singing in thunderous joy. They sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth among people—whom God favors." God does not favor some people over others. God holds all people in the highest regard.

Not because of what we have done or not done. But because of who we are, innately. Just a few chapters later in Luke's gospel, the adult Jesus says that he has come to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim the year of God's favor.

Let's allow the birth of Jesus, the Christ, to save us from those distorted expressions of self and others that keep us hiding in shame, acting out in violence, steeped in guilt. Instead, let God's love fill us with joy. May you discover your own belovedness, and then let love and justice roll in your lives like an ever-flowing stream. Guilt and shame are over. God has met us in our lives as we actually are, in goodness. May you see it and rejoice. Merry Christmas.