

December 24, 2014

Luke 2:1-20

Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church

Humanity at its Best

Two Sundays ago, as part of our annual Sunday School Christmas Pageant, the children of Irving Park Lutheran Church acted out Luke chapter 2. As the Biblical passage we just heard begins, there was Emperor Augustus. In this particular telling, there was a very confused emperor Augustus, scratching his head because he couldn't keep track of everything, and then, with a slow sort of imperiousness, ordering that everyone be counted. "Whatever you say boss," chirped a sweetly smiling, pint-sized soldier at his side." Confusion at the top, bureaucracy at the bottom—how much the world has changed ...

There was a seriously concerned and wide-eyed Joseph, who walked up to meet Mary in the middle, but froze for a few fearful seconds. (There's something Biblical about that pause.) After some urging, Joseph firmly took Mary's hand in his. (Something Biblical about that, too). It was a wonderfully touching moment; watching it, many a face broke out in a grin.

Then the couple walked on over to the inn door. The door had a sign on it, noting that it was "The Original C'mon Inn Inn." (That's not exactly Biblical.) Joseph knocked tentatively on the door. It could have been because the door was cardboard, or because the church, I mean the city, was crowded, in any case, Joseph seemed a little nervous, with Mary, beside him, who whispered, "Uh oh, I think the baby is coming." "Gee, that is a problem," said the innkeeper, who came to the door, industriously holding a broom. The innkeeper seemed sympathetic, but could only do so much: "I don't have a room," he said, "What about the stable out back? That's the best I can do."

There was more than a touch of humor in the very human details of our Christmas play and in the way the children enacted it. The humor and the humanity were not all intentional, but all of it, so very appropriate. The details, extra-Biblical and not, get at the specific and astonishingly unpretentious aspects of the Christmas gospel, the story of Jesus on the night on which he was born. These are the details that the dramas express, that the songs extoll: the busy city, the coarse hay, the company of beasts.

Though it all took place so long ago, in a place and time so very different from how we live today, still, those rough and particular details speak to us. Though our city is very different from Bethlehem, though our homes and our roads and our hospitals have changed, still, this story has about it a knowingness of life. We may chuckle at aspects. Perhaps the humor helps us live with truth of it, the truth of life, still humble, still human, and often, so very, very hard.

We know the weight and distaste of complying with executive orders, the drudgery of filling out forms. We have seen sycophantic smiles painted on the faces of imperial yes men. We sometimes feel lost in a large and unfeeling city, everyone in a hurry, a half-hearted shrug all the help to be had. We've known bodies stretched to their limits. We've experienced the fatigue of long journeys, the discomfort of makeshift accommodations, the dismissals: "no room for you here."

This is what it means to be human, to live in this world, among other humans. We know all about that.

The Christmas gospel story tells us, God knows all about it, too. God knows about political intrigue, and geographical anxiety, and physical exertion, and emotional tension ...

hearts and minds and spirits so sapped that sometimes you let out a hollow laugh, because the alternative is a sob.

The Christmas gospel says, God knows all the details of life that we know. It was just this world that God was born into, in all its humble detail, in all its difficult detail, in all its painful detail. In Jesus' birth, in Jesus' life, in Jesus' death, God knows all about life's rough detail. God knows about abandonment, and utter suffering, and untimely death. Those details are also part of the story, part of the whole gospel story of God come to earth. We hear this also tonight, as we profess our faith, as we move to the table, as we recount another story, the story of the night on which he was betrayed. There was no room in the inn, and no place for the Son of Man to lay his head. The shepherds went to see what happened, but the Good Shepherd saw his flock scatter. The babe was wrapped in bands of cloth; the man was stripped and scourged. The cradle became a cross. That's the detail to which God loves us. God loves us so much that in Jesus God accommodates himself into human form, for us, and for our salvation, he came down from heaven.

Like the innkeeper, we may note that the accommodations are less than first class. I'm sure the stable stank. Much of what we've done to God, and to God's people, stinks, too. People can be beastly. Saying as much does a disservice to beasts.

And yet, in Christmas, God says something else. In Christmas, God says something else to humanity, for humanity, and about humanity. God could have chosen any other way, but God was absolutely intentional about choosing this way: the way of living among us, the way of sonship, and friendship, the way of leadership, and obedience; the way of loving service and self-giving. God could have chosen another way, but God chose humanity, humility, good humor, and humble detail. God chose surprising and touching and unpretentious acts. The dramas get this, the songs express this.

No room in the inn? No problem for God. In fact, that is just the way, that is just the place, that God is born into our lives, still. That's where we will find him. We will find that God is there, in the door that opens for the wayward traveler. We can hold God, as we cradle a child. We can dine with God, as we gather at our tables. In Jesus, God says there is hope for humanity, because God has become one with humanity. In Jesus, the world has changed, and we too can be changed. In Jesus, in the gospel story in all its entirety, God announces with a joyous smile, with absolute and everlasting victory, "This is the best I can do!"