

## Christmas Eve (Year A)

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*Luke 2:1-20*

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,*

*‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

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A few weeks ago, I announced to this congregation that my wife, Tricia, and I are expecting our first child. Hazel Grace Fearing is expected to arrive on June 1<sup>st</sup> of next year. Tricia recently got through her first trimester. Now, I think we should stop calling it “the first trimester” and start calling it for what it really is: “the 13 weeks of hell.” Because it’s hard. Now, I don’t really have much of a right to complain; after all, it’s not *my* body that is completely rewiring itself to prepare to create another human being. But, as Tricia’s husband, I’ve had a front row seat to the reality of pregnancy. And, as a pastoral note, Tricia has read this sermon and has given me permission to share the following details.

First comes the nausea (notice I don’t call it morning sickness because it doesn’t just happen in the morning!). Then comes the anti-nausea medicine which causes constipation. Then comes the mood swings. Then comes the cramps and the exhaustion and the crying at every single holiday commercial. Then come the food aversions and the food cravings. The first trimester is just a doozy.

Now, please don't get me wrong. Tricia and I have had more than our fair share of joys over the past 17 weeks, from hearing Hazel Grace's heartbeat for the first time to seeing her football helmet shaped head on the ultrasound last week. And also, it's important to recognize that this has been our experience and that not every woman experiences pregnancy the same way.

But, the past 17 weeks have taught me at least two things:

1. Women are incredible, resilient human beings and their bodies do incredible things and that's a truth us men don't acknowledge or celebrate enough.
2. Creation is messy business.

And that's really what Christmas is all about: God's supreme act of creation bursting forth into the midst of our messy lives. Because the birth of Christ, and the circumstances in which it happened, was a messy affair.

The truth of the messiness of Christmas stands in stark contrast to what most of us have been taught. If you look at your average Hallmark Card nativity scene, you'll find a quite sterilized portrayal of Christ's birth. It probably looks something like this: a beautiful manger with not a trace of animal feces on the ground. A star hovering above, perfectly mid-frame. In the center, a pristine baby, perfectly groomed, smiling. To the child's left, on her knees, is Mary with her hair perfectly done, looking like she's ready to go to the prom. Standing behind her with his hand on her shoulder, is Joseph, with a look of wonder on his face. And all around them are the barn animals, obediently standing in silence in a perfect semi circle around the new family.

Yeah, right!

Let me tell you what I think *actually* happened.

As they settle into the manger, Mary swears under her breath as she steps in cow dung. She's cranky and in pain as the contractions come harder and faster. Joseph is still furious that the inn-keeper could actually be so callous as to turn away him and his 9-month pregnant teenage wife. They shoo away the barn cats to make room for Mary to recline as it becomes clear that this baby is coming any minute now. Mary begins to sob because she is so scared because she's never done this before. Joseph looks at her and says he's scared, too. After all, he was taught how to read Hebrew but never instructed in how to birth a baby. They both allow themselves a moment of laughter.

But the laughter doesn't last long because Mary begins to groan in pain as the baby begins to breach. Her head rolls back in agony as she begins to push. Her skin becomes all sweaty with her efforts and her hair begins to stick to her skin as she contorts her face with each push. Joseph does his best to maintain his cool but he's never seen anything like *this* before! Then the pain hits a new level as Mary grabs Joseph by the shirt collar and yells at him, "You did this to me!" Joseph barks back at her, "Actually, *no, I didn't!*" Mary screams in pain as the baby begins to crown.

The escalating screams cause the animals to freak out. A cow accidentally steps on a chicken which then begins to squawk and run around frantically. So, now, in addition to the blood and sweat there is now literally poultry feathers raining from the sky!

With one final push and a desperate scream, the baby comes out looking like an alien because, let's be honest, most babies don't look human when they first come out. Jesus is covered in blood and amniotic fluid. Next, the placenta comes out as Joseph looks at it and says, "What is *that!*?" At that moment, the shepherds knock on the door of the manger and Joseph turns and yells to whoever is at the door screaming, "Now is *not* a good time!" Mary is catching her breath and the animals finally begin to calm down. Joseph hands the child to his mother, and both mother and son hold one another, covered in blood, sweat, and tears of both pain and joy.

Creation is messy business. The incarnation of God is messy business.

So why is that important? It's important because God makes himself home in the messiness of our lives. If God only showed up when we were perfect and polished and in our "Sunday best," how terrible would that be? But that's not the case. As Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it, "God did not enter the world of our nostalgic, silent-night, snow-blanketed, peace-on-earth, suspended reality of Christmas. God slipped into the vulnerability of skin and entered our violent and disturbing world."

You see, God couldn't wait for "better" circumstances. For some reason, it was important to God to birth God's son into a messy reality by a poor, marginalized couple from the Middle East during the regime of a cruel ruler named Herod. For some reason, it was important to God that God's son not be born at the Brown Hotel in downtown Louisville but in a poverty stricken county in Eastern Kentucky. For some reason, it was important to God to introduce Jesus to us in the same birthing process as you and I entered this world.

Because God just couldn't wait.

Hope couldn't wait. Peace couldn't wait. Joy couldn't wait. Love couldn't wait.

And I hope that brings you comfort tonight. Because we all have messy lives. Yes, we expend much energy trying to hide that fact but we all know better. We all have our struggles, our anxieties, our fears, our sorrows, and our shortcomings. But, you know what? God won't wait for all those circumstances to resolve themselves to make an appearance.

And *that's* the good news of Christmas! That in the midst of a world that seems so broken, so bloodied, and so divided, that God just can't wait to walk with us through the mess!

So the next time you think your life is just too messy for God to show up, think again! God loves us too much to wait for us to get our ducks in a row to show up and shower us with love and grace.

God just couldn't wait.

There may be better news than that. But I have yet to hear it!

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's children, say: **Amen.**