

Sermon Luke 2:1-14

(Pastor Andi is standing in front of a traditional Christmas landscape scene with a snow-covered house.)

You may be wondering why we're singing Christmas carols in the summertime. Usually for us Christmas happens at the end of December after four weeks of Advent. Advent is a time when we prepare ourselves for Christmas, and there's a lot going on during that time. Students have finals and holiday programs. Families and chosen families gather together. Decorating the church and our homes. Special baking and cooking. The joy of choosing gifts for the people we love. It's a lot.

Have you ever read or seen a Christmas Carol? It's the one about the mean Ebenezer Scrooge whose life is changed when visited by three ghosts on Christmas Eve. It's probably the best well-known Christmas story in America next to the actual Biblical Christmas story. Near the end of the story, Scrooge proclaims that he will cherish Christmas and keep it in his heart all year. That's our goal, too, to keep the wonder of Jesus' birth with us all the time. So, occasionally, I like to read the Christmas story outside of the Christmas season.

This story sounds different in the summertime than it does in the winter time, but our summer season is far more like what it would have been like in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. Yes, we love the snow-covered landscapes, the fireplace, the hot cider. All that is close to our hearts during Christmas time, but it's not very authentic to the original Christmas story.

So how do I change this? Ah. *snap* *(background changes from Christmas scene to inside a barn)* That's more like it.

Jesus' life began in one of the humblest places--a barn. It sounds nicer when you say 'a manger' but it was some kind of barn. This was actually a decent place for out of towners to stay if your guestroom was full because your barn stored your animals. The body heat from the animals would keep you warm.

Details about the birth itself are few. Jesus doesn't even get named until later in verse 21. Our traditional nativity scenes have just Mary and Joseph and the baby, but if this was Joseph's family's hometown, I doubt they were alone. I can picture a panicked Joseph running into an aunt's house yelling for her to come help because... he didn't know what to do. We have no details that suggest Jesus' birth wasn't a really normal birth. Yes, I know we sing "silent night, holy night" but we know that babies aren't silent. Babies cry. Parents probably cry. And maybe after all the hustle and bustle of delivery was done, the baby was washed, clean hay was brought in, maybe then Mary and Joseph and Jesus were left alone to sleep.

Many scholars think historically that this census didn't happen at the time of Jesus' birth. It probably happened a few years afterward. Luke is more of a theologian than a historian as we think of them. This story was written to emphasise the importance of this birth for the entire world and to tie Jesus' birth back into the history of Israel which says the savior is to be born in David's city. We could take so much of this story line-by-line and find ties back into the Hebrew Bible. We could also take all of the historical background and attach it to deeper meaning about Joseph and Mary being willing to be taxed by Rome and therefore not being seen as a threat to the Empire even though we're talking about the birth of the king of kings. Rome epitomized much of the brokenness of the world, especially its exploitation, oppression, and violence. It's quite a statement Luke is making. But it doesn't matter if Jesus was historically born in

Bethlehem or Nazarus or somewhere else in modern-day Palestine. We know he was born in a rural village to Jewish parents under Roman occupation. He was far from the religious and political powers of the day in Jerusalem and Rome. That's not a place where a king would normally be born.

A lot of the language Luke uses is taken from Roman announcements of royal births or royal victories in battles. The contrast between this story and the stories of the birth of new kings is stark in its setting. One birth takes place in the center of the Empire surrounded by military might. The other is in an occupied land in a no-name village surrounded by animals. And it's not the nobles and the wealthy who hear about this birth first. It's the smelly shepherds who are among the poorest of the poor. They probably don't even own the sheep they're watching. It begs the question, who is this good news of a great birth for?

I don't know about you, but I want to jump right over everything else and say this good news is for us. And that's true but that's not the only truth we're reading about here. If I'm honest with myself I have to realize I'm much closer to the 21st century version of Rome than I am to the 21st century version of occupied Palestine. Where are we looking for the good news that is truly for all people? Are we looking toward the caesars or the shepherds? The powerful or the disenfranchised? The celebrities or the forgotten? The trend setters or the isolated?

I have a good friend who I'll call Ben. He's a paralegal at a new, small law firm and has been compelled by the events after the killing of George Floyd to work more openly for racial justice. Ben told me that he knew about many of the issues the Black Lives Matter movement has brought to wider attention. He has a lot of stories about clients of different races, but when he went back through some notes he realized neither he nor the law firm kept track of racial

demographics. While he has some personal stories, he doesn't have firm numbers about types of crimes accused, pleas entered, or sentences given based on race. He's started asking for those numbers to be added.

Ben and his partner just had their first child in January. He hasn't been to the physical law firm since then because he took family leave and since then he's been working from home as part of the firm's response to the pandemic. Ben is a white male from a middle class family, and he knows that if he never said anything about the Black Lives Matter movement or refunding education and mental health care or really any social justice issue we're facing there would be no negative consequences for him. It would be easy to fall silent after the bosses responded negatively to him the first time, and he might have except for the presence of that little baby in his home. That baby has helped Ben realize how attached he is to the idea of a better future. He, like all parents, wants a better life for his child than he has. He doesn't want his child to have to deal with issues that he and those who are adults now can deal with. So, he's kept asking for racial demographics to be added to the law firm's records. It seems like a very small thing to do, but for Ben it's a place to start. It's an awareness that could change the way the law firm handles different cases. It could change the way the law firm sees the criminal justice system going forward.

Ben, like our church, has recently started reading *The New Jim Crow* as another small step forward. I find echoes of the Christmas story in his personal story. Ben hears the good news in the vision of the future that Black Americans, other people of color, and their white allies are working toward. God is present in our world through normal people doing everyday things. God is present in a helpless baby who brings awareness of the possibility of a different future--both in

the Christmas story and in Ben's story. There's a lot we can't change. We may feel weighed down by our personal misdeeds of the past or by the history of racial oppression in America. But God is present and working in our world as surely as new babies are being born all the time.

Change is possible. Jesus' birth tells us that. A king born not to be an oppressor but a liberator. A king announced to the lonely, poor, and isolated first. We can look for those shepherds who have heard the angels singing. We can like Mary take those messages into our hearts and think about them. We can act on that good news everyday in big and little ways. God is with us. God is still with us. And isn't that the greatest news of all? Amen.