

To Dwell Among Us: For Good News of Great Joy

*A sermon preached on Luke 2:1-20 on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2023,
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I.

Just the other day, I was checking out in the line at Target with what I was sure was the last Christmas present I'd need to buy (spoiler alert, it wasn't!), and the Target employee helping me struck up a conversation about Christmas. We talked about the crowds she'd encountered: thousands coming through with their toys and their treasures to buy for another. "Surely you're ready for a break?," I asked her. "Yeah, I am," she said, "but you know, I'm already sad that it's almost here. We prepare and prepare for Christmas, and just like that, it's over."

These December weeks have been so full of preparation for you, I'm sure. The baking and the cards, the concerts and the lights, the family time and Christmas movies – all part of the rhythm and cadence that readies us for this night. It's not all sugarplums and fairy lights, of course. Perhaps you feel like this hour is the first time you've really felt like you can sit still in weeks, without the to do list on permanent repeat in your mind. Counselors and mental health professionals remind us of the stress of the season, the extra ways that grief and loss puncture the perfection and draw us back to real life. Children see it best, like the six-year-old whose Sunday School teacher asked the class what the time before Christmas is called, and she raised her hand and said, "It's called Advil!"¹ I guess it can be that too!

II.

¹ Thanks to John Buchanan for this hilarious story in his sermon from Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, called "Love," <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/122407.html>.

Yet here we sit, hearing the old old story once again. The contours of that night are so familiar, aren't they? A journey for a young couple traveling to Bethlehem as a baby stirred in Mary's womb. A night sky ripped wide open with angels singing amidst the call to not be afraid. No room in the inn. Animals surrounding a manger where the little lord Jesus came into the world. An enchanted father. A breathless mother, weary and wondrous. The swing of time that seemed suspended in mystery.

It's so familiar, that without even realizing it, we brush off its particulars, wear down its remarkable edges, slough off its specifics. We're not regularly experiencing angels tearing open the heavens this time of year. And perhaps you do, but I don't know a single shepherd in my actual life. I'm sure we don't mean to, but sometimes loudly, sometimes imperceptibly, our lives turn away from the babe in the manger.

We're working on our own stuff, you see. We've got bills to pay and boundaries to maintain, items on a list to check off and workouts to do, career ladders to climb and a side hustle to optimize, kids to raise and people in our care. There are new ways of understanding the world that have captured our imagination, you see: an Enneagram number here, an astrological sign there, this political ideology here, that hobby there. Not to mention all the baggage we've lugged around for years: this relationship, that commitment, this boredom, that fear, this trauma, that shame. So rarely do we intend to, but gone unchecked, our hearts begin to fill up like an overcrowded basement. It's musty in there! Too many boxes from college, and that thing you should have gotten rid of years ago! You want to add space for Jesus? You better make some trips to Goodwill, maybe even a time or two to the dump!

III.

Yet a night like tonight is like a holy hollowing-out of what has been, and what might be, and what we lug around just in case we need it. On this holy night, God's invitation sets before us: *let every heart prepare him room.*

Each of us are here tonight with a different need, a particular wondering that has stirred you up. I bet some of us are here, because what we do on Christmas Eve is that we come to church, and we've done it as long as we can remember, thank you very much. Some of us might have come tonight with some poking and prodding – mama wants the whole crew together, you know! (Extra points if you have a button-down on.) Perhaps you're away from your home, or passing through for the holidays, or needing to get out of the house tonight, or felt that this year of all the years is the one to set aside your despair about the world for an hour and sit with friends and neighbors in the dark, and sing the carols, and hear the story, and light the candle. Maybe, as I said earlier, you don't even know why.

My hope, my prayer, my yearning for each of us this year, is that through or despite it all, you hear the good news of great joy, good news that clears out the clutter of your hearts and makes room for Love to dwell right there. That good news is this:

God came close to dwell among us. All of us. Not just for the people who are the loudest or strongest, flashiest or fanciest; not just for those who have it all figured out or at least make it look like they do; not just for those in the rooms where decisions are made; not in the most powerful ways or most prominent places – but for every single creature. God came close for us all: outcast and oppressor, marginalized and managers, retirees and refugees, queer and questioning, curious and cynical, hopeful and hateful, scholars and

students, homeowners and homeless, wealthy and wanting. Every one – every single one – beloved fiercely and fully, no matter what.

How do we know? Well we know where to look: in the most vulnerable of places: the Holy with a brown baby face, refugee parents, a stable to call home, and nothing to their names but the gifts brought from those filled with wonder. Right here among us.

There's a risk to take all of this in – because opening the doors to our hearts and our lives means we can't just keep things as tightly packed as they are. When Jesus enters in, nothing remains the same. When we welcome him, we welcome those with him. We prepare room for Love to sweep out the cobwebs of fear, and clear out the clutter of offense, and haul away the piles of resentment, and shake off the cloak of routine. As one preacher says, "When Christ comes into your heart, he comes to save you from all of that, from the tempting insularity of [modern] life, comes to make you vulnerable again, able to feel and care and weep and love. He comes to change you and to save your life."²

It's stunning, scandalous good news. And the very best risk worth taking.

IV.

The Riverside Church of New York City has been one of this country's most significant churches for more than a century. Theirs is the influence of well-resourced titans of industry and important preachers, with important things to say, and important things to do, with a whole lot of important people to make it all happen. (I'm of course oversimplifying a bit here, but not by

² John Buchanan, <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2000/122400.html>.

much.) All of which made their children's Christmas pageant from 20 years or so ago all the more meaningful.

The children's Christmas pageant was full of the expected bells and whistles you'd find in any church's children's Christmas pageant – just that the bathrobes on the shepherds were extra plush, and the tinsel on the angel's halo looked a whole lot like crystal, because it's The Riverside Church, capital T-R-C.

By this point in the pageant, the innkeeper takes center stage to turn away Mary and Joseph with the conclusive line, "There's no room in the inn." As the preacher later told the story, "You know that moment: the words hang in the air, as Mary and Joseph turn and trudge off into the darkness. The part of the innkeeper and this one line was perfect for Tim, a young man in the congregation who has Down Syndrome. Tim had practiced his line over and over with his parents and the pageant director until he had it.

The big moment arrived. There he was, standing in the front of the church as Mary and Joseph slowly made their way down the center aisle. They approached, knocked on the door, and said their lines. Tim's parents, the director, the whole audience leaned forward, almost willing him to remember his line.

"There's no room in the inn," Tim boomed out, perfectly.

But then, as Mary and Joseph turned on cue to travel further, Tim suddenly yelled, "Wait!" They turned back, startled, and looked at him in surprise.

"You can stay at my house," he called.³

³ See Marian Wright Edelman, *Still No Room in the Inn*.

V.

Good news of great joy, isn't it? So friends, give that love entrance to your life. Let every heart prepare him room. For Christ is born again!