

“Christmas at Luke’s House”

Series: *Christmas at the Gospel Writers’ Homes*

Scripture: *Luke 2:1-20*

Rev. Pen Peery

December 24, 2024



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

Let me take this chance to welcome to you worship this Christmas Eve at First Presbyterian Church. It is good to see all of you – whether this is your church home, or if you are visiting (or in town visiting family). I also want to welcome those who are streaming our service or watching it on our television ministry – this service will air tonight at 11:00 pm on channels 9 and 64.

For the past month, in anticipation of the season, we have been hearing how each of the four gospel writers introduces us to the gift of the Incarnation – that is, the decision that God made to enter our world in the person of Jesus. We’ve framed these sermons as if we were visiting each of the gospel writer’s homes on Christmas. We’ve visited Mark, John, and Matthew. Tonight, our last stop is to visit Luke’s house. Luke gives us the most familiar account of Christmas. I will be continuing to read from the second chapter – picking up at the 8th verse. Listen with me for the word of God...

[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.]

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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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Luke is the only of the gospels that gives us the picture that we most often associate with Christmas.

You know the one: Mary and Joseph in the center of the scene, huddled together around a manger where a baby is wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the hay. Shepherds surrounding them, maybe with a lamb or two at their feet...a shepherd’s crook in their hands. Angels elevated in the air – their halos glimmering,

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their mouths shaped by hallelujahs. The shelter like a shed – or a barn – framing them. The hills of Bethlehem in the background.

All of those details are unique to Luke’s gospel. And they’ve been captured and immortalized by nativity sets everywhere. A Christmas tradition my family started years ago was to collect different nativity sets from around the world. We’ve got a nativity that we bought in Bethlehem that we leave up on our mantle year-round. We’ve got a set from Malawi, Africa. Another from Peru, and from Mexico, and from Cuba. When my kids were little, we used to have a Little People set. In all of them, though the skin color may be different, though the shape of the faces or the eyes or bodies may vary...but what makes each and every set the same is that the characters in the nativity look peaceful, put together, quiet, and dignified.

It kind of reminds me of a carefully staged family picture. Maybe you’ve got one or two of those hanging on your wall at home. I’ve gotten many a Christmas card in the mail over the past month – I’ve seen some wonderful...and carefully staged family pictures there, too. Everybody lined up, smiles on, put together, looking at the camera.

I’m not someone who is overly confident when it comes to technology – but one of the tricks I learned while taking pictures with my iPhone a few years ago is that after you take the picture, if you have the “live setting” turned on, you can press your finger on the image you just took and it will...somehow and magically...allow you to see what happened both before and after the camera captured the moment that you thought was your still photo.

What’s nice about that is if you somehow missed the moment – like if your partner itched their nose, or your Aunt had to sneeze, or your teenager was solidly mid-eye-roll – you could essentially fast-forward (or rewind) a few frames and re-capture that winning moment.

Of course, it works the opposite way, too. Sometimes, just on either side of the shot that gets captured and immortalized, there is chaos.

The picture of the nativity that Luke paints is like that, I think.

It’s a beloved image. It’s what was most associate with Christmas, right?

It makes us feel like all is calm and all is bright.

But you’ve taken enough of those family pictures to know the truth. If you could put your finger on the image of the nativity and turn it into a live picture, there’s no telling what you would see.

Jesus was a baby, after all. They’re pretty unpredictable...and occasionally loud and messy, too.

Mary and Joseph – they were carrying a little bit of stress. Not being married-but pregnant, in Bethlehem to pay a big tax bill, staying in less than 5 star accommodations because “somebody” didn’t make a plan. You can imagine that Mary and Joseph might have been a bit snippy toward each other, glaring, smirking on occasion...that’s par for the course for new parents.

The shepherds...well, let’s just say that there is a reason shepherds work on the outskirts of town. Shepherds were the roughnecks of their day. They were brash. Profane. Not the kind of people you would think would

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frequent a lot of baby showers. It’s a good thing you can’t hear or smell pictures – because the shepherds would not have helped things in either regard.

I actually think the gospel writer Luke would laugh if he knew that...all these years later...we had taken this picture he described of the Holy Family in the nativity and made it into a portrait of perfection. Because perfection is absolutely the farthest thing from Luke’s mind when it comes to why God would enter our world in through a baby who was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.

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There are a lot of ways that we have let the world around us shape our expectations when it comes to Christmas. Believe it or not, you are not failing as a parent if you don’t have a new car with a giant red bow in the driveway for your 16-year-old tomorrow morning. Or as a spouse if you don’t have diamond ear rings in her stocking.

Christmas isn’t about a table sagging under the weight of gourmet food...it doesn’t depend on limitless and manufactured joy, either. All of those things are what we’ve come to *think* Christmas is about because the world around us has shaped our minds and our expectations.

And, of course, that doesn’t just happen as it relates to Christmas. We also let the world around us shape our view of God.

I recently read something by a retired pastor named John Buchannon that took me back to my philosophy classes in undergrad. John reminded me, in a lot of ways, that how we’ve come to understand God is shaped – not by the Bible – but by the culture behind it. When the Bible was written, the prevailing thoughts about God were influenced by ancient Greek philosophy that taught that God was perfect.

And by “perfection” what they meant was that God had no needs.
That God had no hopes for something better.
That God was unchanging.
That God was unfeeling.

There’s a Greek word for it – *apatheia* – from which we get the word apathetic.
The Greeks didn’t think that God loved – because God is perfect – and to love is to be vulnerable...to be dangerous...which in their estimation is much too human and not at all divine trait.

But then came a new idea – an idea that informs the way the gospel writer Luke tells us the Christmas story: It’s the idea that God *does* love...and that God loves with all the risk and vulnerability that comes when someone makes the choice to love.

In reality, the entirety of the Christian faith is in direct contrast to the Greek understanding of God – because, as we see in Jesus being born into the world – God is only God in relationship.¹

¹ This is a quote from the Reformed theologian Douglas John Hall

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When you visit Luke’s house at Christmas, kind of like our own, it is far from perfect, but it is full of evidence of God’s love.

The manger itself is an example of just how vulnerable God’s love for us can be – that the One who would save and redeem us would start his life utterly and completely dependant on us! That the parents of the savior of the world would be so lowly, and young, and unprepared. That the angels would choose to announce this miraculous birth – not to the powerful, but to the marginalized who nobody would even believe if they had shared what they had been told.

But more than what we might see, Luke’s house also has a *feeling* that is familiar to us. It’s that feeling of not exactly knowing what time it is. Whether it is a time for hope or a time of fear. A time of risk or a time of opportunity. It’s a little foreboding; not knowing what to expect. Being realistic about the dangers of the world, and yet cautiously optimistic.

When Luke tells the Christmas story, he is careful to set what God is doing against the backdrop of the real world – with Emperor Augustus, and Governor Quirinius, and all the everyday, complicated dynamics that people who lived in that day and time would have to navigate.

It is true, too, that when we hear Luke’s Christmas story on this night we are aware of the headlines. We know that there is uncertainty. We know that there is conflict. We know that we face problems that have been too-long ignored. We know there is a lot about our world that is a real, real mess.

And that – my friends – is the good news that Luke wants us to hear about Christmas.

Because when it seemed like the world was a mess – God chose that moment – in such a vulnerable way – to enter the world in order to demonstrate love and to encourage us to love one another. What a risky and holy thing.

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Over the years, I’ve had lots of people...some of you, even...tell me that they weren’t ready for Christmas.

They didn’t mean that in a “my shopping isn’t done,” or a “I’m not ready to for my in-laws to come stay at our house,” kind of way.

They meant that they weren’t in the right *head space*.

That they were *dealing* with too many things: too much hurt, too much grief, too much confusion, too much chaos in the world.

They meant that they didn’t feel as *happy* as they thought they should feel.

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They meant that they didn’t feel *worthy* of the gift that is the announcement of God’s presence.

Maybe you’ve had those feelings around Christmas before...I know I have.

It’s as if we’re waiting for a different moment – a better moment – a more perfect moment...for ourselves or for the world around us...so that we can be ready to welcome the love of God that shows up in a manger.

Well...ready or not...unto us – with all of our imperfections and into this world as it is...unto us a child is born.

With heart big enough to love us – and this world – just as we are.

Maybe even so that we can be transformed by that love into something more than we are.

Merry Christmas.

Amen.