

Luke 2:1-14 (NRSV)

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!”

I

The night that I became a father, the delivery room was crowded. Between my wife Amy’s doctors and nurses and the two teams of doctors and nurses awaiting the arrival of our twin boys, there were at least a dozen people in the room.

When our third child Joshua was born a few years later, it was essentially the same. We were in modern hospitals with state of the art equipment, and there were many highly skilled trained professionals on hand to assist with the delivery. The room was crowded.

This time of year, a nativity scene adorns a table in the living room in our home. And it looks, in a word, crowded. There are figurines of Mary and Joseph and the baby, of course, and also a group of shepherds on one side, and the three kings on another, and even a few villagers gathered around. And of course, there are the animals, too – the sheep and the donkeys and the camels. A few years ago, I discovered that one of our boys had even added a tiny toy rhinoceros to the scene.

Of the four gospels, Luke gives us the most biographical and historical detail about the birth of Jesus, but when it comes to the actual delivery of the baby, all Luke tells us is that while they were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to deliver her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son.

It's possible, even likely, that when the time came for Mary, the room was mostly empty, except for maybe Joseph and the animals.

And even though Joseph gets no speaking lines in Luke's gospel, I wonder about him. Even though we were in a state of the art hospital with trained professionals all around, I was plenty apprehensive when our children were being born. I wonder if Joseph was terrified. I wonder if he felt helpless. I wonder if he felt like this was all wrong, like this wasn't how all of this was supposed to go.

II

And I wonder if all of us are feeling that way tonight, too? I don't know about you, but I'm used to big crowds this time of year. Ordinarily, the week after Christmas, we travel to see our extended family and we have many celebrations and gatherings.

But not this year. This year, this sanctuary is far less crowded than usual. This year, we won't be gathering with lots of relatives and old friends. This year, we're all apprehensive, if not downright terrified. It feels all wrong. This is not how it's supposed to go.

III

But as we come again to this night, as we come again to this story, I'm mindful once again of this theme that keeps coming up in Luke's gospel – that when the kingdom of God is breaking into the world, it always starts small, and it always starts in out of the way

places. The king of kings and the lord of lords is born this night not in a palace with dozens of courtiers gathered at the door, but to a young couple in a small village that isn't even their hometown.

When heaven goes to announce the birth of the Messiah, the one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny meets, the announcement is made not in the capital city to the power brokers and financiers, but in a field to some shepherds.

And this theme – wherein the kingdom of God breaks in not in the seat of power, starts not with the powerful and mighty, but rather with the outcast and the poor, in the small, uncrowded, insignificant places, that's a theme that is going to come up over and over again in Luke's gospel.

The inbreaking of the kingdom of God does not require a big crowd. The inbreaking of the kingdom of God does not require fanfare and fuss. All you really need for an authentic nativity scene is a Joseph and a Mary, a you and a me, people who are willing to make room for God to work in and through us.

IV

My friend, I imagine that for you, this Christmas looks and feels different. But it's still Christmas. It's still the night when we remember and proclaim that God does not sit far off in the heavens somewhere, but that God comes to us, right into our messiness and brokenness and pain and fear. It's the

night that we remember that this child is Emmanuel – God-with-us.

My friend, God comes to you in Christ this night not because of who you are, or who your people are, or the size of your power or pocketbook, but simply because of who God is. God comes to you not because of what's happening or not happening in the halls of power or in the center of things, and not because of anything you've done or not done or said or not said, but because there is no power on earth or above the earth or beneath the earth, nothing present or to come that can separate you from the love of God made known to you in Christ Jesus.

This is the night that we proclaim that the entire course of human history and human destiny changed because of one baby, born to one couple, in one small place, far, far away and long, long ago.

V

And so we need not pack into this sanctuary and sing at the top of our lungs to celebrate Christmas.

When we spend less of our attention on the doings of the powerful and privileged and more on the needs of the poor and the marginalized, the church celebrates Christmas.

When we worry less about buildings and budgets and “optics” and worry more about the weightier matters of the law – righteousness and justice and mercy and grace, the church celebrates Christmas.

When we prune ourselves of the bitter thorns of strife and jealousy and anger and quarrels and dissensions and factions, and instead work together to cultivate the sweet fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness, the church celebrates Christmas.

This is the smallest, quietest, most uncrowded Christmas this room has experienced in a very long time. But it's still Christmas. This is still good news of great joy for all the people. The ones who look like us, and the ones who don't. The ones who pray like us, and the ones who don't. The ones who vote like us, and the ones who don't. Good news of great joy for all the people, For unto us is born a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.

May we celebrate Christmas with the words of our lips.

May we celebrate Christmas with the songs of our hearts.

And this year of all years, may we proclaim Christmas with the work of our hands.

Amen.