

Christmas Eve, 10:00 PM  
December 24, 2018  
Text: Luke 2:1-20

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Portland, Oregon

On Christmas Eve, we get only the very beginning of Jesus' story. It almost seems like watching the first 10 minutes of a movie, and then stepping out of the theater, or reading the first chapter of a book, and then setting it back on the shelf. But our Gospel writer is a true artist, and as he tells the beginning of the story, he does so in a way that helps us remember all of the other essential things we need to know about the baby born this night, and all that he means for us as more than just a baby. With each step, each character, we receive one more marvelous promise from God.

The first step—the story begins with a decree that went out from the Emperor Augustus. A census was required for the whole world. For us who are hearing the story, it reminds us that the birth of this baby boy isn't just a local affair. It concerns everyone—the whole world! It concerns us, because this child's life will have an impact on the entire human family.

Step by step, promise by promise—because of the census, Jesus' parents had to leave their home to travel to Joseph's family home, in Bethlehem, because Joseph's ancestor was King David. And as we listen to the story, it reminds us that Jesus' life is going to be connected to the deepest hopes and dreams carried by God's people for generations—hopes that God would rescue them from their enemies, that God would set them free, that God would provide a leader who would embody the qualities that the people needed. And Jesus is that leader, not just for the people of Israel, but for the whole human family, for us, who leads the way for us to a new future not defined by the failures of the past. Jesus makes possible a future defined by forgiveness and by reconciliation.

The story unfolds, step by step. Joseph and Mary arrived in their ancestral home, but there was no room in the inn, so Jesus was born in a stable—not in Jerusalem's royal palace, not in the temple, but a stable. We are reminded how God comes to be with us in Jesus, not with the trappings of power and privilege, but in humility. God reaches so very low to become part of our lives.

Step by step, promise by promise, the next characters who appear in the story are shepherds—not just the poor and lowly, but in the eyes of Jesus' contemporaries, shepherds were “undesirables.” The religious leaders saw them as ritually unclean. So this is amazing! Shepherds are invited to join the celebration! It reminds us that,

when God comes to us in the life of Jesus, nobody is excluded. Nobody is left out. God's embrace is wide enough and inclusive enough for everyone—because everyone belongs.

Step by step, promise by promise, next comes an angel—a messenger from God. And the message is good news. Who isn't nearly dying to hear good news! Not more of the same old same old, not more reports of greed and violence and suffering, but good news—a Savior is born, to save us from ourselves and from the mess we, collectively, have created. Jesus is the one who comes to set us free, to give the whole human family new life.

Step by wonderful step, now the shepherds are directed to go to Bethlehem, where they will find the child in a manger, of all places. For the baby Jesus to be set down to sleep in the manger is more than just a sign of the humility with which God comes to us. A manger is a food trough—where food is set out for God's creatures. It reminds us that Jesus, and everything that he embodies in his way of living with compassion and forgiveness—Jesus is food to nourish our souls. Jesus, as he lives his way of love, is food to give us strength for the journey—because the journey of life is hard. We need everything that Jesus gives to help us find our way.

Tonight, step by step, promise by promise, we are reminded that, most of all, this is a story about a birth. And it's not just Jesus' birth that we celebrate. We also celebrate the invitation God gives for the whole human family, for you and for me, to enter into a new life, a new future. The expression the Bible uses is "born again," and it refers to everyone who turns to Jesus with faith and hope, who embraces Jesus' promise of forgiveness, who follows in Jesus' way of compassion and serving. Tonight, we give thanks to God for Jesus' birth, and we give thanks to God for the new life that God gives to us—a life reshaped by God's forgiveness for us, by God's embrace of us as beloved children, God's promise that nothing in life or death has the power to separate us from God's love.

It turns out that the gift God gives tonight isn't just the new life born in the stable so many years ago. Each step of the story is leading to this: God gives new life now—new hope, new purpose, new strength—here, in the hearts of you, God's treasured people. Thanks be to God. Amen.