

Detour sermon series – The Birth
Luke 2:1-7
December 20, 2020
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Merry Christmas! Hard to believe we're already here at Christmas Sunday. This year has been so strange and time has felt warped. Some months seemed to last for years, and yet December has flown by and we're already close to the manger. Maybe time has moved fast because of our excitement to get to Bethlehem, but I wonder if it's not because we just can't wait to get this blasted year over with. 2020 just keeps coming with the bad news, doesn't it? And yet, we believe that Christ is about to be born again and bring with him new life, new hope, and a new start. I don't know about you, but I'm ready for all that.

But first, we need to put a bow on this Advent season, one of the strangest ones I've ever experienced. Normally, by this time in the season we'd be worn out from all the holiday hoopla: buying the presents, attending parties, wrapping the presents, decorating the house, mailing the presents, trying not to overeat, standing in line to see Santa, paying off the credit card you used to buy the presents...I'm tired just thinking about it.

But this year has been significantly different. Some of my favorite songs are ones in which the musicians unplug all their electric instruments and do a stripped-down, acoustic version of the song. This year has been an acoustic version of Christmas. It's been nice, even with all that 2020 has given us, to experience Christmas without all the chaos that usually accompanies it.

That acoustic aura fits the actual Christmas story. The scripture from Luke we read today is such a simple story for such a big event. It reads more like an in-brief news item tucked back on page 6 of the Lifestyle section of the paper. Later on in the story you get the shepherds and the angels and the wise men, but for now we have this unspectacular tale, almost lost in the larger narrative. The reality of Luke's story is that Jesus' birth is about as average as it comes. We think of Christmas as something extraordinary, but this story couldn't be more ordinary. The circumstances are so basic and humble in origin that it's hard to appreciate just who it is that's being born here.

But that is what makes this story so powerful. Something that would later change the world started off as something so commonplace. This passage from Luke is overflowing with paradox. A paradox is defined as "a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true." Think how absurd these statements seem at first. The fact that the God of the universe would come to earth as a little baby is a paradox. It's the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and End, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, emerging as a baby who couldn't speak or feed himself or change his own swaddling cloths. Paradox. The Messiah, who will free the oppressed, is born during a time of Roman oppression. Paradox. This baby, who is a descendant of King David, one of the richest and most successful Jewish kings, is born in the poorest and most humble of circumstances. Paradox.

In fact, the ethos of understatement that dominates this story might seem like a paradox to those of us who equate bigger with better. The unwritten rule of thumb seems to be more significant the event, the more hoopla it deserves. We don't throw big parties

for someone's 42nd birthday or 12th anniversary, do we? We wait for a time that is more significant, more meaningful. Well, what could be more significant and meaningful than the birth of Christ? This story should be a big deal, yet Luke treats it like just another birth.

I wonder, if in the midst of this season, if we also treat it like just another birth. I wonder if we've lost the paradox. I wonder if we have become numb to the sheer subversiveness of this story. The son of God, the King of Kings, born right under the nose of Caesar Augustus! Born to an obedient peasant girl named Mary and a faithful carpenter named Joseph. Born in a cattle stall and laid in a feeding trough. God becomes human. That's absurd! And yet, we believe it is true.

But excitement can easily turn to apathy after repeating hearings. Maybe after 2000 years of publicity, the shine may have rubbed off the Christmas story a bit. When you hear a story once, it's captivating. When you hear it twice, it's endearing. When you hear it three times, it gets to be a little repetitive. But when you've heard it every year for your whole life, you can begin to take it for granted.

When we do this, when we lose the power of the paradox in this story, we also lose the mystery and wonder it holds for us. Christmas as a season is utterly dependent upon mystery for its meaning, and I don't mean that strictly from a religious standpoint. Part of the mystique that Santa Claus holds over our kids is the mystery of what he does. How does he make all those toys? How does it get down our chimney? How does he eat all those cookies and still fit into his suit? The sacred meaning and secular magic of Christmas is grounded in and dependent upon mystery.

I wonder what it would be like if, as adults, we beheld the Christ child with the same awe and mystery that kids hold for Santa. Do you remember that feeling as a kid when you walked into the room on Christmas morning and saw what Santa had left under the tree? Wow! What if we responded that way to Christ's coming this year? The story hasn't changed. The mystery is still there. But it's up to us to see it, not through world-weary eyes, but through fresh ones, looking expectantly for the joy and hope Christ brings.

That's the key for Christmas to remain alive in us. For so many of us, we're now at the point during Advent when we're asking, "Are we there yet?" Not because we can't wait for the birth of Jesus, but because we can't wait for it to be over! Soon will come the frenzy, and then the holiday letdown, and then the Christmas tree takedown, and then it's January, and we'll be right back where we started when Advent began. That's almost depressing to think about, isn't it? Where is the mystery, where is the wonder in that?

I believe for the spirit of Christmas to be alive in us in January and July, we need to approach Dec. 25 with a sense of wonder. Albert Einstein said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It's the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed."

The mystery of Christ's birth reminds us that there's something else going on here, something which compels us to open our eyes to God's presence among us. And that something is so unbelievable it almost demands our attention and our questions: Why a baby? What does this mean for us? Will Christ be born again this year? What gift will he bring to this weary world?

That sense of wonder at this time of year is important because as we move into life beyond Christmas, those questions don't go away. While they may fade they are replaced by more pressing questions, questions brought on by the challenges and cruelties of our complicated lives, questions like "What is my purpose?" and "What is my future?" and "Where is God?" and "Are my prayers being heard?" Life is a series of questions, and without a sense of wonder and curiosity, without an openness to the mystery of God's work, our eyes are closed to the answers around us.

I once heard Christ's birth referred to as an "emerging miracle." I think we all can appreciate that life is a gift and that anytime a baby is born, a miracle emerges into this world. But that term also implies that what happens at Christmas doesn't end at Christmas. The true miracle only starts there and continues to emerge as we move forward, eyes open, into the mystery of faith.

Christmas is such a major happening in our church and our culture that often the beauty of the Christmas story gets treated as if it were the whole story. It's become so romanticized and sanitized that it sometimes feels like a fairy tale, a wonderful story that provides a brief escape from the world we face every day, like some vacation from reality. I don't know about you, but I don't need a Christmas Break, I need a Life Break! Just a couple weeks to process all that 2020 has brought us. But life doesn't stop, even for Christmas. That's why we can't stop our understanding of Jesus here, either. This is only the beginning of what Jesus came to do, and Jesus is inviting us deeper into life, not inviting us to escape from it.

The mystery of Christmas doesn't end on Christmas Day. The wonder of what God is doing in our world and in our lives is ongoing. The love that the Christ child represents is still alive, right here, right now, within us. Christ's birth points to a simple truth: When life is simple and when it's complicated, God is with us. When things are extraordinary and when things are ordinary, God is with us. If God can take this ordinary birth and do something extraordinary with it, what can God do with the ordinary circumstances in our lives? Don't let Christmas end this year. Don't close your eyes to the mysterious. Christ is coming. God is becoming one of us. A miracle is emerging. What a gift! Merry Christmas.