

I want to ask you to remember three things tonight: Good news. Great joy. All people.

Good news!

Yes, good news! Whether we live in an era where Caesar forces us to leave our homes and register for a census, or whether we live in an era where a pandemic forces us to stay home, Luke's story reminds us that there is good news to be had: God is always present with us. And in this season of Christmas, God chooses to come and dwell among us; the Creator experiences the world as one created. Good news indeed!

Great joy!

Great joy! Yes, gimme some of that, please, and thank you! The angels sing a lovely tune, and in my imagination, it's a little *Halle, Halle, Halle* with a Motown twist. And sleepy shepherds, after overcoming an initial shock, dance happy steps beneath a winged chorus. The cows and the sheep say, "Moo, and Bah, and Fa-La-La-La-Lah!" A young mother snuggles a newborn against her chest; her heart flutters with anticipation. A star's bright light reflects in the twinkling eyes of villagers. God does not come into the world with the manufactured joy of Caesar's parade; God's divine birth conjures up a down-home kind of glee. God's great joy is revealed in the margins; God's great joy leaps into a little place called Bethlehem. Thanks be to God!

All People.

All people, yes, ALL people experience the glad tidings of this great joy. Yes, Mary's heart is warmed, and she treasures and ponders these things, but guess what, so do the shepherds! They've got an extra giddy-up in their steppin', because the tale the angels told them was every bit as true as it was audacious: God is as good as advertised. So the shepherds share what they've witnessed, and the ones who hear their tales, feel great joy, too! Caesar can keep his proclamations of domination; Our God, a good, joyful God, invites us into a collaborative experiment.

It's funny, lots of people think the hardest thing to reconcile about this version of the Christmas narrative is Mary's miraculous conception. Well, to be honest, I think it's even more miraculous that Luke's author is able to conceive a message of good news, great joy, and all people, given the grim setting of such a story. Tell me friends, in what world, do little boys born to peasant refugees living under brutal dictatorships, and without the benefit of adequate shelter and food, grow into adulthood, let alone into persons that channel, express, and illumine God's presence in unprecedented ways? Only, I think, in God's audacious world!

Allow yourself, if only for a moment, to experience the power of this story. Caesar's minions proclaim his divine birth; with the stroke of a pen, families travel great distances to be counted; his counselors and entourage reside in the highest levels of society, and they don the fanciest of robes, and sip the finest wines. Caesar is only powerful because of illusions of pageantry, and brutal displays of force. Who wants a Lord like that?

But our God, our joyful, loving, inclusive, affirming God, enters the world with simplicity. God's entry is just as fragile as yours and mine; Jesus' parents feel the same rush of vulnerability, and exhaustion, and joy as yours and mine did; And a community resonates with the simple, but powerful miracle of birth. God experiences our story.

The power of this child, and the power of the One whom he represents is not one of illusion and coercion. It's borne of love. And that love will transform the world.

It's 2020, and it feels like there's no room in the inn. But as our friend Ruth Gouldbourne reminded us a few Sundays ago, God is still doing Christmas, and all the Christmas things that remind us of God's presence among us: Good news; Great joy; All people. Friends, let's receive this triumvirate in 2021 – we too might be delighted to discover a God who is as good as advertised. And maybe, just maybe, they'll be some singing, and some dancing, and some star-gazing, too. I sure hope so!!!

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.