

St. David's Episcopal Church, Christmas Eve 2021, Luke 2: 1-20 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

I'm so grateful to have an in-person service this year. I keep struggling to remember how Christmas worked last year, because it felt skipped since we were shut down. On Christmas Eve a handful of us were in the room while everyone else had to watch on the livestream. Some people sang in the hallway with special masks but I was not allowed to sing. The sense of participating in the story was lessened.

This is our story as Christians, and it is a beautiful one. It's also very familiar. I remember being a new priest wondering how I could ever shed new light on this old story. After many Christmas seasons I've finally realized that's not my job. My job as the preacher is to get out of the way and let this story work its magic on us.

Because it is so familiar so we might gloss over pieces of the story, so I want to lift three such pieces briefly tonight.

First, look at the opening: "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." When we hear those words we might feel lulled into a comfortable place, like "Twas the Night Before Christmas" or "Once Upon A Time." But the Christmas story is not a fairy tale, and those two sentences tell us something important and dark about the world into which Jesus was born: his country was occupied by an empire, a powerful empire that could move people around in order to be counted for the purposes of getting more money out of them.

When we approach the story of God becoming one of us, setting is important: not a stable, but the country. The empire. We hear traces of this when we recite the Nicene Creed every week: Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Pilate represents the empire.

Mary is another name we may gloss over in this story. We might dismiss her as the beaming virginal mother in a blue veil. Last Sunday, we heard the Magnificat, which could be called Mary's fight song, with its call to fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty.

There are a *lot* of Marys in the stories about Jesus, aren't there? Mary Jesus's mom and Martha's sister Mary and Mary Magdalene. Couldn't someone have come up with different names?

One theory is that all of these Marys were named about Moses' sister Miriam, because she was a powerful women who, like Moses, broke away from the oppressive empire of Egypt. In addition, Herod the Great had a wife named Mariamne whom he executed, so the name being popular at that time likely had rebellious implications. So keep that in mind when seeing the young mom.

Finally, let's talk about the word manger, which comes up three times in tonight's reading: "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."

"This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

"So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger."

That detail comes up three times. A manger, a manger, the manger. Why emphasize manger? Jesus in a food trough is certainly a compelling image, and perhaps the most recognizable out of the whole story. But why do you think Luke mentioned it three times?

Being a sacramental person, I immediately leap to the words I used to say when I handed you all the sacrament: the body of Christ, the bread of heaven. But I haven't actually said those words for a while, because due to the pandemic we've used the factory-sealed sacrament, so I usually say just "the body and blood of Christ" when I distribute to you. This Sunday, however, the 26th, we are going back to real bread. We will again connect Christ to real food, not the crumbly cracker on one end of what our bishop calls "Jesus snack packs."

I don't know that Luke wrote the word "manger" three times so that we would associate Christ with the Bread of Life that we receive at communion, but that's what leapt to my mind. As we savor this time together tonight, together at a Christmas Eve service for the first time in two years, I hope that we can treasure all the words in the stories and songs and prayers, and like Mary did, we can ponder them in our hearts. Turning them over and over and over, seeing an old story with eyes of wonder.