

Christmas Eve 2023

Luke 2:1-20

Rev. Leigh Curl-Dove

A few weeks ago, Pastor Anita and I filmed a podcast for the Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches. We chatted with Rev. Sam Kim about all things Advent—what is difficult about the season, what we love about the season, how we as pastors experience the season. To close the podcast, Rev. Sam asked pastor Anita and I what advice we would give to a fresh-out-of-seminary grad experiencing their first Advent and Christmas season as a pastor or minister at a congregation.

I jokingly, but also not that jokingly, said that if you are responsible for buying communion elements do not wait until the day before or the day of Christmas Eve because the grocery store is awful. But, on a more serious note, the advice I offered is that if you are giving the Christmas Eve sermon or homily to not put pressure on yourself to say something profound or new. Because this story, the story of Christ's birth, the story of God coming down in a human body, the story of God becoming flesh, is already the greatest story ever told. This is the good news. So even if that is all you say in your homily, that's okay because it's the best news there is.

Sometimes, the most difficult advice to follow is your own, because this week I have tried and tried to come up with something new to say about this story. Something profound that we haven't all heard a hundred times, and as I read and re-read Luke's story of Christ's birth I just kept thinking of how normal it all is.

Luke keeps the story of Jesus birth short and to the point. There is no grandeur. There really isn't anything special. It is abundantly mundane—"While they were there, the time came for [Mary] 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 in the inn."

The time came, Jesus is born, Mary swaddles him, and lays him in a manger. That's it. There is no crowd for the birth, no decorations, no banners reading "It's a boy!" Just a young Jewish Palestinian mother and father with no place to shelter or go to give birth except outside where the animals are fed. It didn't matter that they had no place to go or that they had been forced to travel to register with the empire that occupied their land, because Jesus was coming and nothing was going to stop him.

You've probably heard it said that they've canceled Christmas in Bethlehem this year. Bethlehem is in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and as a sign of solidarity with the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank, local leaders made the decision last month to cancel the Christmas celebrations due to the ongoing and relentless annihilation of Palestinians in Gaza.

So, this year in Bethlehem there are no crowds. No decorations. No banners reading "Merry Christmas!" No trees adorned with ornaments. No multicolored lights to decorate the buildings.

But, while the celebrations for the season have been canceled and there are no decorations to be found, Christmas itself is far from canceled. Because Jesus is coming, Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, is born and nothing can stop that. No amount of bombs or attacks can stop Jesus, love incarnate, from being born.

A couple of days ago, artist and iconographer Kelly Latimore released a new icon, called “Christ in the Rubble.” In the image you can see buildings crumbling and falling down, some of the buildings are on fire, and the holy Palestinian family is in the center with rubble piled on top of them and all around them. It’s convicting, it’s heartbreaking, it’s hopeful, it captures the world Jesus was born into over 2000 years ago and the world Jesus would be born into today. When he released the icon, Kelly Latimore pondered the question, “How do we create a world where our poor, homeless, refugee, Palestinian Savior—born to a teenage mother and later condemned to death—would be cherished had he been born today.”

Christmas hasn’t felt very Christmas-y to me this year, the world just feels so heavy. I have had doubts about whether or not we’d ever get here to Christmas, and if Jesus really would be born. Here, the decorations are just as beautiful as they always are. There are plenty of Christmas lights all around the city. There are plenty of banners with “Merry Christmas!” or “Happy Holidays!” I have watched some of my favorite Christmas movies and listened to my favorite Christmas songs. Even with all of that, it’s been hard to find the Christmas spirit and experience the magic of this season.

But then I hear Luke’s words...

There is no crowd, no decorations, no banners reading, “It’s a boy!” There are certainly no trees adorned with ornaments or multicolored lights decorating any buildings. It’s just a young family with no place to take shelter to give birth except outside where the animals are fed. But nothing could stop him then, and nothing can stop him now, Jesus is born. The Incarnation will not and cannot be stopped.

Friends, hear the good news on this Christmas Eve, “While they were there, the time came for [Mary] 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 in the inn.”.

Hallelujah and Emmanuel, God is with us.