

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church Pastor Jonna Bohigian

This Is Good News

Luke 2:1 – 20

Merry Christmas! I am so glad that you all are here! It is truly a privilege to worship with you on this very special day, and to have so many guests. I recognize that you could have chosen to be *anywhere*, and you chose to be here, so thank you. We are honored by your presence.

My name is Pastor Jonna, and one of the most important things to know about me is that Christmas is my favorite. Do we have any fans of the movie *Elf* here? Every time Christmas rolls around, I feel like Buddy the Elf, who loves Christmas more than *anything*. "It's just nice to meet another human who shares my affinity for elf culture." "You smell like beef and cheese. You don't smell like Santa."¹ So many good lines! *Christmas is my favorite!*

Christmas has *always* been my favorite, but I *will* say that the older I've gotten and the more I have come to understand about Christmas, the *more* I have come to love and appreciate Christmas. And so, on this Christmas Eve, I will share the same Christmas story that has been told for 2,000 years, with the freshness of someone experiencing Christmas for the first time.

The author of Luke writes that Jesus was born during a census. But this was not just *any* census. This was a census imposed by a foreign empire.

When I was young, my family and I went to a Bethlehem Marketplace. It's one of those events that re-enacts the birth story of Jesus. I remember seeing soldiers in uniform, weapons at their sides, imposing order on the crowd, and leading everyone to the table where you payed

¹ <https://parade.com/958009/alexandra-hurtado/elf-quotes/>

your taxes. One man asked if he could buy my mom for a few camels. I don't know if that was considered a good deal, but my dad decided to be a good husband and not sell his wife.

The people were under a foreign occupation and were required to pay taxes to this empire. In the first 5 verses, Luke refers to the census 4 times. He does this intentionally. Luke wants us to feel the weight. The foreign occupation of the Roman Empire was imposing a census on the entire Roman world. And that included a faraway land in the Middle East, where Mary and Joseph lived. They needed to leave their home to register and pay taxes to a foreign empire that promised peace, but brought terror.

And so, Mary and Joseph travel to Joseph's ancestral town, Bethlehem. When they arrive, it will be on the town's honor to open their homes to them. If they are turned away, their entire *town* will be shamed. This is not something that *anyone* in this culture will do; they *will* take them in. So, Joseph and Mary go to a relative's home, and they take them in. Newer translations of the Bible say that there is no room in the "guestroom," and that's a good translation. There are no "inns" in this story. There is no room in the guestroom, so Mary and Joseph stay with their family in the main room and place Jesus in a manger near the animals. Mary and Joseph are simple peasants, and have a simple beginning for their newborn son. Their son is welcomed into a full house, with family members and animals mozing about. A cozy and lovely beginning, really.

Rome demanded that Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem, yet even this foreign occupation could not inhibit God's purposes. A prophecy had been given that from Bethlehem would come a ruler over the people of God (Micah 5:2). Rome intended to serve her own purposes, but God would use Rome for *God's* purposes.

Rome would *not* have the final say. Even amidst occupation, God would have his purposes fulfilled – but not quite in the way one might expect.

The Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, was a self-proclaimed “son of god.” He claimed to be the savior, the one to bring peace to the entire world. He was called “lord,” and his acts were called “good news.” Caesar was the “son of god,” “savior,” “peace,” “lord,” and “good news.”

And these are the *very* words spoken by the angel about a little baby, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. The angel tells the shepherds that one has been born who is good news for all the world, one who is peace for all people, one who is the Savior and Lord. What the angel tells the shepherds is a not-so-subtle message that Caesar may *claim* to be these things, but he is *not*. The One who has been born is the real deal, the One they have been waiting for, the One who is for *all* people.

Shepherds in their time were like Mary and Joseph; they were peasants. They were not the rich or those with social influence. They were a *surprising* choice to proclaim this message of good news for all the world. Generally, shepherds were not the most trusted in society, yet to these simple shepherds, God chose to share *spectacular* news.

The sky was ripped open, and heaven came to earth. The sky was ripped open, and angels sang, praising God. What a *spectacular* sight that must have been, to see a host of angels and to hear their song! And what an incredible *honor*, to be the first to hear of the Savior’s birth, to be the first to visit, and the first to share this good news!

This is what we celebrate every Christmas – a simple peasant family, who had a baby during an occupation, and simple shepherds who heard the news of this baby from a host of

angels. But is that all? It's a *spectacular* story, but is that *all*? Is our Christmas celebration something that has any *relevance* for us in the 21st century in Silicon Valley? Or is it simply a story from the past, and now a quaint tradition?

Now, don't get me wrong – I would probably think Christmas worth having as a tradition, even if it *didn't* have any relevance to us. I think the children's pageants are so cute. The music is transcendent. The decorations are beautiful. But if it doesn't mean anything more than that, it's just a tradition.

I once met a woman who believed that the God of the Old Testament was completely *different* from the Jesus of the New Testament. She saw the God of the Old Testament as harsh and unforgiving, the God pointing with His demanding finger down on us, criticizing us for our wicked behavior. She saw the Jesus of the New Testament as loving and accepting. She didn't like the God of the Old Testament, but she loved the Jesus of the New Testament. She didn't see any problem with her belief.

But you see? There is a *considerable* flaw in her understanding. The God of the Old Testament is *not* completely different from the Jesus of the New Testament. As we explore the Old Testament, we see a God who created us to be in perfect relationship with Him, a God who chose a people so that all the world would know God, a God who continued to rescue His people, a God who did *everything* He could so that He could be near His people. His people could not make their way to Him, so He made a way to be with them.

Finally, the time had come for God to be with them in the flesh. A living, breathing, walking, talking, God, who would experience the joys and sorrows of life, who would live and

die just like every other person. The time had come for Jesus to be born. Some would call him “Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.”

Friends, *this* is what Christmas is all about. Christmas is about God becoming flesh and being with us. One Bible translation says that God became “flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood” (Jn 1:14, MSG). God was not satisfied to remain apart from us, so He humbled Himself by becoming human and moved into the neighborhood.

It’s a pretty incredible thing, really, because I am very aware of how ungracious, how unloving, how self-centered I am. And yet, God came to be with me – and He came to be with you. “Immanuel,” God with us.

One of my favorite poets is Malcolm Guite, a college chaplain in Cambridge, England. Guite wrote this beautiful poem for Christmas, entitled *Descent*.

“They sought to soar into the skies

Those classic gods of high renown

For lofty pride aspires to rise

But you came down.

You dropped down from the mountains sheer

Forsook the eagle for the dove

The other gods demanded fear

But you gave love.

Where chiseled marble seemed to freeze

Their abstract and perfected form
Compassion brought you to your knees
Your blood was warm.

They called for blood in sacrifice
Their victims on an altar bled
When no one else could pay the price
You died instead.

They towered above our mortal plain,
Dismissed this restless flesh with scorn,
Aloof from birth and death and pain,
But you were born.

Born to these burdens, borne by all
Born with us all 'astride the grave'
Weak, to be with us when we fall,
And strong to save."²

Jesus was born. Immanuel, God with us. Born with flesh and blood. Born in humility.

Born as a little peasant baby under an occupation. Born 2,000 years ago, yet born for you and
born for me.

² <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2012/12/25/descent-a-christmas-poem/>

This peasant baby would grow into a man. A man who would risk everything because of his love for all people, and who would eventually would *lose* everything. He was a man that the people hated, because he didn't fight their oppressors and because he challenged the religious system. He didn't "fall in line;" he didn't play by the rules. And he was killed for it. But his death wasn't the end. He was raised from the dead, and now his Spirit is with us. His Spirit is alive and active, and is working in the hearts of those who love God.

Because Jesus was born, God is with us. And God is with us because He loves us. God loves you. He loves you and came for *you* at Christmas.

I'd like to invite you, if you have questions about faith or life that you would like to explore, to visit Alpha in January. In Alpha, you will experience a non-judgmental environment, where people simply want to hear you. In Alpha, you will meet Christians who will approach you with humility, not assuming that they have all the answers, but will be present with you as you explore questions of faith and life.

She came through the church doors one day and asked to speak with a pastor. She had stage four ovarian cancer and the doctors told her she didn't have long to live. She knew that she needed *more*. She needed more of God.

Her name was Emily, and pretty soon, it seemed that the entire *congregation* knew her. She came to worship every Sunday, she joined the prayer group to pray for others, she became a part of the church family. No one could miss Emily, because it seemed that she was always with others, desiring to hear their stories and desiring to serve *them*. She was the one with the scarf on her head, the one who looked well beyond her 40 years of age.

My husband would come home and tell me about Emily. He was so impressed by this woman who came to worship on her own, while she was in the worst condition of her life. He would say that if anyone had an excuse not to come to church on a Sunday morning, it was Emily. Yet, every Sunday morning, there she was. She had a stronger faith than just about anyone he had ever met. She was in great pain, but no one would have known it. She was as joyful a person as you ever met.

As the months progressed, Emily's mobility was severely diminished. Soon, she was no longer able to worship on Sunday mornings, and she became depressed.

My husband would go to visit her in the hospital. He would sit with her in her pain and remind her of her hope. He would remind her of her future hope, that one day she would be fully with Jesus and without suffering and pain. He would remind her of her present hope, that Jesus was always with her.

In her pain, it was understandably difficult for Emily to see a present hope. She felt alone and depressed.

My husband reminded her that Jesus comes in flesh and blood. When he came down at Christmas, he took on human flesh, and experienced pain and death, just like every other human. Jesus understands our pain and loneliness. And he comes to us in the human flesh of others. "There are so many in our church community who are in this with you," he would say. "They are praying for you."

She would break into a smile, hearing about the church who loved her. She had hope; she had good news, Immanuel, "God with us."

God *is* with us because Jesus was born for you and me on Christmas. This is good news.

Merry Christmas!