Christmas Eve—Year B
Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

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. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

And so it was on that very first Christmas. A moment in *time*, a moment in *history*, located in a *particular* place with exquisite *specificity*. Human beings caught up in forces bigger than they. That **decree that went out from the Emperor Augustus**, it was *dogma*, and the world is forever acquainted with *dogma*—**decrees** from on high, full of *requirements* that *carry a burden* never felt by the one making said **decree**. And like cogs in some giant wheel, **all start in motion** to fulfill a *desire not of their making*.

It was the **Emperor** and his **dogma** that **set Joseph and Mary on their way to their own town**, but what about you and me? What **set *us* on *our* way to come to *our* own town**, to come to *this* particular space on *this* particular night? Was it a *longing* for *familiar ritual*? Was it a *yearning* for *glorious music*? Was it a *desire* for the *scent of mystery* or the *need* to *behold beauty*? Was it a *hunger* for this *old, old story* and the *cadence of words* that have been told this night for thousands of years? What *requirements* or *expectations* welled up in *our* hearts that **set *us* in motion to come** out in the dark of a cold winter's night? What *desire, not of our making*, has brought *us* to *this* place with *exquisite specificity*? We, *too*, are *caught up in something so much bigger* than we.

You see, **this birth**, it breaks in us as we are *moving about our lives*, amidst *forces* so much bigger that are *beyond* our control, amidst *forces* and *motivations within* us we often *don't* understand, *and* amidst *requirements* and *expectations* that we *think we <u>do</u> understand*. But in the end, ***none of this matters***, because **while they were there**, *while we are here*, **the time comes to deliver the child, the time comes to give birth, and wrap him in bands of cloth, and lay him in a manger, because there is no place in the inn.** It *doesn't even matter* if you think *you don't have room in your life* right now for God because *God is laboring to be born*, and *this birth won't be denied*. It doesn't matter if you'd like to stay on the periphery just a little while longer, enjoying all the things that surround this celebration, but not get too close so as to lose control of the situation. *Forces bigger than we bring us* here this night, and *forces bigger than we conspire **to be born***, right here, right now, in *this chaotic world* **and** in *our chaotic hearts* that so *yearn* to *hold this child close*.

And God is going to keep rounding up folks to bring them to this birth.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Like the **Emperor's decree**, the **shepherds** weren't looking for **the birth of the Son of God**, they were *doing their shepherd thing* as they did every night. But God had different designs on their hearts and **surrounded them with glory**, and quite honestly, we human beings never know what to do with *that*. Mostly, **glory scares us to death**, and so it did those **shepherds**.

But **the angel spoke** those words that **the angel *always* speaks, "Fear not. Do not be afraid. This is good news of great joy for all people: to you, *to you* is born *this* day in the city of David a *Savior*, who is the *Messiah*, the *Lord*"—the One** who can make us **whole**, **the One** who will show us how to **inhabit our divinely infused skins** and **radiate the glory** that's been with us since **the beginning of creation**, the **world's** *and* **ours**. **"And this will be a sign for you**"—*because this is a truth so big, so wondrous, so full of mystery, you're going to have to **behold** it for yourself*—**"you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly that angel was joined by a multitude of the heavenly host**—because **glory** is never content to play it small—***glory always desires to scoop us up into it until it fills our beings, too***.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." The **desire** to **behold** this sight was just *irresistible*. And the greek here is rich. **They want *to see***, they want ***to see with the eyes and with the mind***, they want ***to become acquainted with this by experience***. And the *"this"* that they wish to ***experience*** is ***more than an event that has happened***; it is ***something that has come into existence, come into being***. This is about ***essence***, ***the nature of being itself***, and ***this becoming*** is something that *God Godself has made **known** to them in the deepest and most intimate of ways*—this is the kind of ***knowing*** that *draws you intimately close and swoops you up in the divine embrace*. The shepherds *can't not* go; **they *have* to go**.

You see, brothers and sisters, you may not know all the reasons why you have come here this night, but that horse has left the barn. ***You are caught up now in something way bigger than you, and your heart is locked on home.*** You *can't not* come to this **manger** now, and you *can't* keep a safe distance. No, you're going to have to ***behold*** *this up close*, and you're going to have to ***speak*** *of what the angels have spoken*, and you're going to have to ***name the glory*** *you have seen*, and you're going to have to get used to *being **radiant***. ***This birth changes everyone who comes close to it.***

And you're going to have to settle in with the truth that this babe *hasn't* just been born to a young woman, but ***this babe has been born in you and in me***. And as we *all* come to terms with this birth—**the shepherds**, **Mary**, **Joseph**, **you** and **me**, we set about the holy task of **treasuring** and **pondering**. ***Treasuring*—holding this *knowing* that God is born in our flesh, holding this *Word made flesh* close in our hearts, and bringing *all these things together in our hearts*. *Pondering***—*symballo, to throw together*—it's the *opposite* of *diabolical, to throw apart*. **God is born to *bring together*, to *bind up*, to *heal*, to *make whole* amidst all in our world that seeks to *throw apart*.** To **ponder** is to join God in this most *creative* and *redemptive act* of *throwing together* and ***tossing*** *joy* over and over in our heart **knowing** that **more is coming together** than we will ever be able to comprehend.

But we don't stop there. The **shepherds left** the manger, and as they did, ***they*** **became angels themselves heralding good news, glorifying and praising God, for all that *they* had heard and seen and experienced.**

In the quiet places of your heart, God has been born again. Your flesh bears God's marks—birth, death, resurrection—and so, it doesn't end here.

The world is sorely in need of **angels** who **proclaim**, **"Don't be afraid,"** and **transformed shepherds**, and **Marys** who can **treasure** and **ponder**. The world is sorely in need of **people who can risk some first-hand experience with divinity**, and **proclaim *to all* the good news that they are beloved of God from the inside, out.** The world is sorely in need of **something that is so much bigger than *dogma***, and only **the mystery of God is big enough** to fill those shoes.

The great mystic and contemplative, Howard Thurman coined a wonderful phrase—*"the work of Christmas"—"the work of Christmas"* will come soon enough, but *tonight, tonight* is about hearing the **angels** *sing their song of courage*, and letting the **star** *focus our gaze like a laser*, and letting the **shepherds** *lead our hearts home*. Tonight is about **treasuring** and **pondering** and **beholding glory** and ***the miracle of God's longing meeting ours*** as divinity takes its first breaths in our flesh.

Tomorrow, in the light of day, we'll figure out what to do with *all this new life*, but *tonight*, just **behold the mystery** of it and ***know*** that some **Words** *are not meant to be spoken, but only* ***held in the flesh*** *and* ***treasured in the heart****.* Amen.

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