

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church
December 24, 2017 Christmas Eve Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

Prior to the reading of the gospel:

We are about to hear again a story that has become so familiar to us. It is the same story, but you and I are not the same as we were last year or the year before or the year before. We have changed. Something in our circumstances has changed.

Maybe there are new people in your life or maybe someone is notably absent this year. Perhaps your health is different, or you are in a new place, or you have gained some new perspective or knowledge.

Whatever changes you have experienced, let this familiar story speak to you in the place where you are this year. Let the word of God dwell in your heart tonight.

The Holy Gospel according to Luke.

Following the reading of the gospel:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

This year my ear has been tuned in to the people who are absent in this familiar story. I was “listening in” to a conversation on Facebook that took place between some female pastors. One of them said that it would have been ridiculous to think that Mary gave birth with no other women there to help her.

Surely the midwives in town would have noticed and she would have been surrounded by them. Who else would have told her about how to care for her own body after the child was born? Who would have cut the umbilical cord? Who would have swaddled the baby properly? Surely not Joseph! So by the end of this conversation these women all agreed that they would find a way to add a midwife or two to their nativity scenes.

But the thing is we have added all kinds of characters and details to this familiar story. Mary must have ridden a donkey the four days it would have taken to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. If there wasn't room in the inn there must have been an innkeeper who opened up his or her stable—and there must have been a stable if there was a manger.

And then, of course, there were animals—at least one donkey, one cow, one sheep, and if we paid attention to the song of the Friendly Beasts there would have been a dove or two “in the rafters high.”

But Luke doesn't mention any of these. No donkey for Mary to ride, no innkeeper, no midwife, no animals to keep the family warm. Just Mary and Joseph, and the child who was laid in a manger—a feed box. Now, just because Luke doesn't list them doesn't mean these characters weren't there when Jesus was born. But let's just wonder together what the absence of these characters does to the story.

Somehow Joseph and Mary made the long journey from their family and whatever friends they had left after her scandalous pregnancy was discovered, to a small town that was basically foreign to them. Bethlehem was the city of David, a shepherd boy who grew up to be a beloved king of Israel. David was Joseph's ancestor by several generations, but there is no telling if Joseph had ever lived in Bethlehem. It would be like me calling Enderlin, North Dakota my hometown because that's where my grandfather was born, even though I never lived there.

Theoretically Joseph would have been going to a place where there were lots of relatives, but Luke does not have them welcomed to town by Aunt Mable and Uncle Henry. No one greets them. No one expects them. They are just one couple in a mass of maybe thousands who have come to a place because they had been ordered to go by the government.

All they had was each other to rely on. Hopefully, Mary's mother and aunts and even her cousin Elizabeth, who Mary had visited when baby John-the-future-Baptist was born, had told her what to do when it came time for the delivery. Hopefully, she had shared these instructions with Joseph as they travelled together. What else did they have to talk about?

So on that night, hopefully in the safety and warmth of a stable or a cave, were two people who had no one to rely on but each other. And though they were far from a home they knew, it was there that they made a home—a father, a mother, and a baby. There, in the birth of that child, God came to make a home with those two frightened people.

Tonight, as we celebrate the birth of that child, God comes to make a home with us, too. "A child has been born—for us, a son given—to us."

Last year my husband and I were surrounded by 15 other members of my family for Christmas. This year it is just the two of us. Whether you have come here tonight by yourself, with someone else, or with many others, we have all been drawn here together by one person.

Jesus has come to us. He is Emmanuel, which means God-with-us. He is the One who was promised, whose name means Savior. Jesus is the Lord who is and was from the beginning our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

With all those titles, all that majesty, all that is worthy of a heavenly host of angels singing his praise, God has come to us in a way that we can know and understand and relate to. Our God came to us as a human baby and makes a home with us—wherever we are and with whomever we find ourselves this year.

May the Prince of Peace dwell with you, tonight and always. Amen