

Christmas Eve: Arrival
Luke 2:1-20
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
12-24-13

How appropriate it is that we gather here tonight, wrapped in warm candlelight. As the rest of the world gathers around festooned dinner tables, filled with the finest food they can provide, gifts wrapped in bows and ribbons, here we are gathered for another gift, this one wrapped in a different way. We sing songs, join our voices in prayer, and listen to the story of how God quietly and without much hubbub slipped into history just as each one of us did, in the form of a helpless baby.

Fifty years ago last month, a similarly subdued event took place. Overshadowed by the headlines that President Kennedy had been shot and English Author Aldus Huxley had died, one of the most important voices for Christ, CS Lewis, quietly left this earth—with not more than a handful of people present at his funeral to remember him. But what's become of him since is nothing short of miraculous.

Isn't it ironic how such momentous events happen with comparatively few people actually paying attention—yet the long-term impact is immeasurable? We profess this Christmas Eve that this is the pivotal event in all of human history, the event that literally defines all human life. The book of John says **that in him was the light and life for all humanity**. This event happened with only a few people actually looking on. But maybe it's better this way. Maybe competing for press coverage or celebrity spectacle only diminishes the mystery and wonder of Jesus' birth.

There is much that competes for the center: center of attention, center stage, center court. But what occupies the center of our lives? Every one of us must make something the center of our lives, and if this isn't the center something else will be. Whether it's your career or your family or anything else, what happens when those don't turn out right? Your career won't love you back, what if your family doesn't turn out like you hope? Jesus steps into the world quietly and gently and offers us unconditional acceptance and unyielding love—even if we fail him, he forgives us completely. So in the quiet of this moment and the tenderness of this story we might consider, what is ultimate in our lives?

There is actually a wonderful picture of this from the very first Christmas. I want to walk through it together. It turns out that the picture a lot of people have in their minds about what happened on the night Jesus was born is not exactly what the Bible talks about. It turns out there is something really wonderful going on at Bethlehem, and it has a lot to do with you and me.

Now the picture a lot of people have of that first Christmas is that Mary and Joseph show up at Bethlehem. There is a big crowd in town because of the census going on. Joseph goes into an inn, but it's booked. "No Vacancy" signs. So Jesus has to be born in a barn or a stable, some place with animals all over the place. It seems kind of not hygienic.

Ken Bailey, a great New Testament writer, says this is not a likely scenario. For one thing, hospitality was a big deal in the ancient Middle East. A village's honor was at stake in how they would treat guests, particularly here because Bethlehem was called "the town of David," and Joseph was said to be of the house and lineage of David. He was in David's ancestry. He could knock on any door in Bethlehem, and people would welcome him in.

Also, if you think about it, Joseph has known for nine months his wife is going to have a baby. If that was you, wouldn't you have called ahead and made reservations, done something? Any husband would not wait until the last minute to make sure his wife would have some place to have the baby, especially if the baby was going to be the Savior of the world.

It turns out Bethlehem was small enough that it probably did not have an inn as we think of them. In the Middle East in that day, most people were quite poor, and they lived in very simple homes that would just have one room. Everybody didn't get, you know, their own private bedroom, all that kind of stuff. Not in that day.

If you go in the door, there would be on the inside, to the right, a little area where people would actually bring in the animals they might happen to own at nighttime. They might have a sheep, might have a donkey, might have a pet of some kind.

Then, they would have a manger or two in the main room where the animals could feed. During the daytime, the animals would go out. That one room, that was it. Families would do their cooking, eating, cleaning, sleeping, living. That was it. That was their home. Now a family *might* have a second room, a kind of guest room. This would generally be attached either on the back end, or the roofs were usually flat, so it might be above the other room. It would be a guest room or an upper room. Almost certainly, it was a simple home like this to which Joseph took Mary in Bethlehem.

Now a famous old King James translation of the Bible says Mary laid Jesus in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn, but the word Luke uses there is not the Greek word for a commercial inn. Actually, the word used was the word for a guest room or an upper room.

Ken translates it like this: **"Mary gave birth to her firstborn, a Son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because the guest room was already full."** In other words, what happens is they come to a private home. Because the census is going on, the guest room is already full. So the people who lived in this home said, "We will make the heart of our home available for you, Joseph and Mary, so Jesus can live right where we live." What was there was not a heartless innkeeper or Joseph as an inept husband. What was there was grace.

Another beautiful picture of grace at Jesus' birth. Angels come to shepherds, and they tell them, "The King has been born." The shepherds are supposed to go visit the King. The angels say, **"This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling**

clothes, lying in a manger." Something fabulous is happening here. There is a reason why this sign is given to the shepherds.

See, shepherds were very poor people. Shepherding was sometimes listed as an unclean occupation in Israel. Shepherds were at the bottom of the totem pole of status. So a shepherd would assume that if a king, if a Messiah had actually been born, he would be lying on satin sheets in a palace of gold. He would, for sure, be in a home of a governor or a king or a VIP, and for sure, a shepherd wasn't getting into that house.

It would be very much like telling a really low status person in our society in our day, like a migrant day laborer or something, "The President and the First Lady have just given birth to a child. You go to the White House and demand to see it." They'd never be allowed inside. In fact, they would be turned away. In fact, they would be humiliated. Shepherds know if the Messiah has been born, it will be in such a place that they're not letting shepherds in there.

So the angel says, "This is a sign to you: the baby will be wrapped in swaddling clothes." Not, you know, a gold leaf diaper as it's described in the movies. Swaddling clothes are what peasants wrapped their children in. No designer label tags on those. "You'll find the child lying in a manger, not a crib of gold." Mangers were where peasant people laid their children.

"Shepherds, He is going to be like you. He will be one of you. He will be poor and ordinary like you. You can get to Him. You will have free access to Him."

Nobody needs to be rich enough or smart enough or strong enough or good enough. Not with Jesus. Nobody who really wants Jesus will ever be turned away. This is the gospel for shepherds. This is the gospel of grace. This is the good news of Jesus. It still is to anybody who will make room.

Jesus doesn't say to us, "I'm coming, so roll out the red carpet, prepare the fanfare, make sure the publicity campaign has gone viral." He approaches us from a place of humility and comes near to ask, "Is there room for grace here?" Imagine our lives are like the city of Bethlehem, where would you say Jesus is? Maybe He is outside. Maybe if you're really honest about it, you'd say you don't really think much about God. Maybe you're not sure God exists. Maybe you have questions about the Bible or about the church. You do find yourself hungry for something deeper than just survival, than just the body, than just popularity, than just money, than just a comfortable middle class life in a safe community.

Jesus steps into people's lives every day, not by barging in or proclaiming his presence, but Jesus is a gentleman, Jesus stands at the door and knocks, Jesus quietly and humbly enters...but don't get me wrong, when he does come in, life as you know it is turned upside down. In even grander fashion than CS Lewis and the legacy he now holds with the world, the initial event was humble in means. But what took place from there and where the Spirit of God went, infinitely transformed history. And it can transform your

life tonight. So as we arrive, we arrive with all the hopes and fears of our lives, and I promise you, that if this child becomes the center of your life, he will make you into the person God Almighty created and formed you to be: beloved, safe, secure, cared for child of God.

Allelujah...He is Here...Amen.