

God's Strange Appearing

Luke 2:1-20

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent
The Community Church of Sebastopol
United Church of Christ
Christmas Eve – December 24, 2016

I.

Here we are on the night the church calls the holiest of all nights.

We have finally arrived at Christmas Eve.

Our journeys to get here have been various.

Some have intentionally practiced observing the season of Advent, four Sundays preparing for this first great feast in the Christian liturgical year, the feast of the Incarnation.

Some are observing the tradition of coming to church on Christmas Eve, to hear the old, old story and to sing the carols – it wouldn't be Christmas without it.

Some are here who live close by, others traveled a great distance; you are here to be with friends, with family, with community, with the great cloud of saints who haunt our memories with their abiding love.

Perhaps a few of us here and we're not quite sure why.

Why do this strange thing, come into this strange place filled with strange people to sing strange songs and to hear this outdated, outmoded, outlandish story about God's strange appearing once upon a time?

Our task tonight is not primarily to relish the warmth and comfort of this familiar story, though that will most certainly happen, for anything repeated enough times becomes familiar.

No, our primary task could be described as *attempting to un-hear* this story so that we can hear it again as if for the first time.

This un-hearing is urgent because we have all settled into patterns of understanding, including patterns of understanding God, that keep us from hearing the good news of great joy. Here it is, from the mouth of an angel:

"Glory to God" who is not yet done with the world,

And peace on earth, a justice-filled peace on earth, which is God's good pleasure to bring.

II.

Sometimes people say to us preachers, gently or not so gently, that we ought not preach politics from the pulpit.

Those folks are largely right – partisan politics that divide them from us and attempt to fit God into an ideological box shouldn't be confused with the good news of the gospel which always defies our petty schemes.

However, I would claim that the gospel makes no sense separated from the political background against which it is told, and it also makes no sense separated from the political background against which it is heard.

If God so loved, and loves, the world, then God cares how we treat each other, and the word for "how we treat other" on a grand, systemic scale, is "politics."

The Bible asserts again and again that God is less concerned with individualistic morality and more concerned with systemic justice.

Consider the political background against which the Christmas story is told:

"In those days..." Luke begins his tale.

In other words, the Christmas story does not happen in mythic time, does not unfold in a time outside of time.

Instead, the first Christmas happened "in those days," on dates and in places that existed in history, not just "once upon a time."

Next, Luke situates the story within a geopolitical framework, beginning with Emperor, or Caesar, Augustus, who decreed that all the world should be registered.

I should pause to point out here that there is no historical record outside of Luke's Gospel that such a census ever took place, but there is historical record of Caesar Augustus who not only could make such a demanding decree, but also could define what "all the world" meant.

In other words, the Roman Empire defined the world, defined reality, and gave orders within that definition.

The Gospel writer Luke then mentions Quirinius, the governor of Syria.

Syria as the location of geopolitical suffering and strife looms large for us today.

At the time of Jesus' birth, Syria was a territory under the control of Rome, part of "all the world," which contained the fertile crescent where Palestine-Israel is located today.

After situating the story within the Roman Empire and within the territory of Syria, Luke tells us that "all went to their own towns to be registered."

Notice there is no registered complaint or protest from "all" who went.

The emperor said it, the governor administered it, that does it.

And now, against the backdrop of "in those days," of empire and Caesar, of territory and governor, of "all the world" and "all went to their own towns," the story takes a remarkable turn.

Joseph, a low-income Jewish craftsman, returns to his ancestral town, Bethlehem, with his fiancé, Mary, who is pregnant.

Do you hear the strangeness of the contrast? Try this:

In the last days of the presidency of Barack Hussein Obama, when Jerry Brown was governor of California, Jose and Maria Garcia returned to the pueblo of Briseñas. Huh? Who? Never heard of them. Where? Never heard of it.

By telling his story this way, the Gospel writer Luke is making less of an historical point and more of a theological and political point.

Against the backdrop of major political actors and grand bureaucratic machinations, a peasant man and pregnant woman make a journey to Bethlehem where she gives birth to their baby; a baby who could be described as an un-caesar, a non-governor, a nobody of any consequence, a cog in the machine of the empire.

And *this*, Luke's story asserts, *this* is how God appeared in the world.

III.

God's strange appearing threatens to mess up our thinking about who and how God is.

You see, we humans keep wanting to describe God in this way: a benevolent dictator combined with a self-help guru combined with a warm feeling.

But Luke refuses that characterization and instead tells the story of God showing up in the middle of nowhere in the life of a baby born to a vulnerable couple in precarious circumstances.

And the already strange story gets even stranger.

An angel appears. The word "angel" means *messenger*.

And to whom does the angel-messenger appear? To the authorities? To experts? To politicians? To preachers? To the newspapers? To the cable news outlets? No.

To shepherds. It is laughable.

Shepherds, smelling of wet wool and worse, living on the margins of the towns, were not exactly connected.

They were not social media savvy. Their followers did not tweet so much as bleat.

And of all the people, or groups of people, to whom the angel could have brought the good news of great joy, the message was wasted on a bunch of shepherds who were not prepared for, but terrified at what they heard and saw. Terrified.

The angel appeared to the shepherds and gave them a message that was most certainly for them, yes, but also for all the people, maybe even all people, period.

"To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

I'll bet even the shepherds thought that last bit was too much.

"You're telling us that the long-awaited Messiah, the anointed one of Israel, the Christ who incarnates God's very presence on earth, has come, and that we can go find him over in Bethlehem lying in an animal's feeding trough."

But before they can think about too much, as if to magnify their bewilderment, a whole heavenly gospel chorus backs up the angel singing "Glory to glory to glory to glory to glory to glory to God!"

Can you hear the absurdity of the contrast?

A few weeks ago, my family and I went to hear the Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir sing at the Paramount Theater.

Wow. The music. The venue. The energy.

During one of the interludes, the musical director described how the choir goes and sings at San Quentin State Prison.

Imagine that beautiful, positive, energetic music in that ugly place.

And yet *that*, Luke is saying, *that* is the story of God's strange appearing, defying our expectations, showing up in unlikely places, giving the best news to the least likely and most undeserving.

We humans keep wanting God to be in charge in ways that we want God to be in charge.

And yet, to be in charge according to our definitions so often looks like the political systems we put into place, systems that work sometimes better and sometimes much, much worse than we intended.

That is why our theology needs to be bigger than our political ideology.

According to Luke, God is political in that God enters the world of our politics, our economics, our history, and our social disparity.

Enters, yes, but God's politics are not beholden to our own.

We keep expecting God to be the one to choose sides so that when we hear the words "peace among those whom he favors," we think, or hope, that God favors *us*.

But the Greek words translated "among those whom he favors" are *en anthropos eudokia*, which in the Broadbent translation of the Bible, due out in Spring of 2017, reads "peace to humans according to God's own pleasure."

In other words, the God we are introduced to at Christmas is not a God who comes to help us get what we want, but rather a God who is trying to get something out of us, is trying to get us to see God in the least likely places and disguises, is trying to make us more human, because "more human" is what gives God pleasure.

God is trying to get us to imagine a politics, whether in the church or the city or the nation, that does not make an idol of power, but is always wandering around on the outskirts of things, is always found lying in a manger.

IV.

At the end of Luke's Christmas story, the shepherds have a little conference and decide to go find the baby in the manger, which they do.

One can imagine them on the way trying to clean themselves up a bit hoping they might get to take a turn holding the baby.

Who knows what Mary and Joseph thought when this ruffian band of uncouth men holding crooks arrived at the stable.

I wonder if any of them had any idea about the story that was unfolding in their lives. Luke says the shepherds had a clue which is why they went and told others what they had seen.

And those others "were amazed at what the shepherds told them."

Amazed when they heard the story for the first time.

And Mary, for her part, treasured all these words in her heart, taking time to ponder what they might mean.

And then one last line from Luke, as if directly to the church itself, to Luke's early church community, and to this motley crew of worshipers gathered here tonight.

Luke writes, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

I wonder if we can we un-hear this story enough to hear it again as if for the first time?

Can we un-see all that we have seen enough to glimpse God's newness disguised in the days ahead?

I don't know, but I have a Christmas hunch.

If you think you know where to find God, think again.

Amen.