

Christmas Eve 2024: Luke 2:1-14

Christmas snuck up on me this year. I know that shouldn't be possible, because it's always December 25th, every year, but here we are. Maybe I had more on my schedule, or maybe I didn't manage my time as well, but I found myself more than ever before clinging to those words of promise: *It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes, or bags!*... That, of course, is not the Gospel according to Luke, but the Gospel according to the Grinch who stole Christmas. Still, the older I get, the more I'm convinced that the point of that story is less about discouraging kids from the materialism of Christmas and more about reminding us adults that maybe we don't need to do all we think we need to do to try to make Christmas magical. Even that little reminder that *Jesus is the reason for the season* can still sound like no more than a check on our motivation as we shop and bake and decorate and gift-wrap our way to December 25th. I'd rather like to tweak it to say *Jesus is the answer or alternative or antidote to the season*, if we feel like it's up to us to create Christmas. Our families may expect us to perfectly replicate traditional recipes; our neighbors may expect us to go full Griswold with our decorations; our friends may hope that we've shopped with care and generosity...but all of those are expectations that we have put on ourselves and each other; those are not Jesus' expectations.

Luke gives us a very precise list of who was doing what at the time of Jesus' birth because he wants us to know that Jesus was a real historical figure and he wants to make a statement the kind of God who would choose to be born through a family with virtually no social standing compared to the emperor, the governor, or the king. But the other thing that Luke's description shows us is that God did what God wanted to do on a timeline that could only make sense to God. God did not wait until Judea was free from Roman occupation or until a less brutal ruler sat on the throne. God did not wait until Mary and Joseph had finished their compulsory journey to participate in the census, or even until they could secure more comfortable accommodations. God did not wait until the shepherds had a night off or, we imagine, the chance to take a shower and put on clean clothes. It is ironic how much time, energy, and resources we spend preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus when, by any human metric, the world was in no way prepared for the incarnation.

But that is a wonderful reminder for us that God really does come to us as a gift. The truth is that we would never be able to get ourselves ready for the overflowing love, the endless mercy, the full abundance of the Lord. It's not up to us to make Christmas magic, to create order out of chaos, or to be the light that drives out the darkness of this world. We do

charge the newly baptized to *let your light so shine before others*, but the candle that we hand them when we say that is lit from the Paschal candle; our calling is only to *reflect* the light of Christ, the light of love that God first shines on us. For all the preparations we make and all the gifts we seek to give, we must admit that God first came to people who weren't very well prepared, as a gift that we so deeply need, but that we could never give ourselves.

As a reminder that it's not all up to us, that we are merely reflecting the gift of God's love and light, I'd invite you, after you commune, to hang a little mirror on our tree. And then, please, take one with you, out there into the world, which demands and expects so much of us and tells us to expect so much from ourselves. Hang it on your tree and remember: this Christmas, like the first Christmas and every one in between, God is with us, not because of how well we've prepared, not because of anything we have done or could do, but because God loves us so much, God could not wait to come to us. Let that be the good news we reflect into our land of deep darkness: on us, God's light has shined.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.