

December 24, 2023
Advent 4 and Christmas Eve
Luke 2
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

2 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2**This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3**All went to their own towns to be registered. **4** 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. **5** He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. **7** And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

8 Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: **11** to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." **13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

15 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." **16** So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. **17** When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, **19** and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them. (NRSV)

This time of year, we talk a lot about home. "Home for the holidays," "I'll be home for Christmas." What I've learned is that home isn't always a physical place. Home is a feeling we have when we know we are welcome and loved just the way we are. It's a feeling of belonging and knowing we are right where we are supposed to be. And when we find that feeling, we want to take off our shoes, hang up our coats, put away our phones, and stay awhile.

There was a Folgers Coffee commercial that captured that feeling a few years ago. The commercial opens with a college-age son quietly walking in the front door. He slips into the kitchen and makes coffee. The smell of the coffee wakes his sister up,

and they have this really sweet moment in the kitchen together before everyone else wakes up. The commercial was called "Coming Home." We all related to it because that feeling of truly being at home is a feeling we know.

That feeling is what Clark Griswold wanted for his family in the movie *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. He planned and prepared. He tried so hard...searching for the Griswold family Christmas tree in subzero temperatures, working for hours on his light display in the front yard, and even welcoming surprise guests, Cousin Eddie and his family, including their rather unruly dog, Snots.

But between the dog getting in the trash, Cousin Eddie emptying his sewage tank in the front yard, the cat getting electrocuted, Uncle Lewis scorching the Christmas tree with his cigar, a surprise squirrel living in the tree, and Clark's boss substituting a jelly of the month club membership for a real bonus, the last thing anyone wanted to do was stay awhile. As their extended family was packing up to get away from the chaos as fast as they could, Clark says, "Nobody's leaving. Nobody's walking out on this fun, old-fashioned family Christmas. No, no. We're all in this together."

Throughout the movie, it seems like the feeling Clark was after was always just out of reach. We've all been there.... maybe not on that level, but we've been there; we forgot to thaw the turkey, ran out of eggnog way too soon, the cat walked across the cake on the counter, or the dog opened someone's gift prematurely. It is hard to see in the moment, but if we are trying to make people feel at home, maybe chaos is a key ingredient.

For the last few weeks, we've been talking about what it takes and what it means to create space for people to feel at home. And if we learned anything from Clark Griswold, we learned that it's work, but it's worth it. At the end of the movie, with his smiling family around him, Clark realizes Christmas is about gifts, lights, or the perfect anything. He says, "[Christmas] means something different to everybody, and now I know what it means to me."

Hospitality is one of the overriding themes in the stories of the Bible, and it is deeply embedded in the Jewish faith and culture. Hospitality wasn't just a good idea for Jewish families or something they trotted out for the holidays. It was a mandate from God. If someone needed shelter, they were taught to invite them into their home. And when a person stayed in your home, they belonged.

I've always wondered if the story of Jesus' birth, in which hospitality seems to be lacking, would have been startling to the early followers of Jesus for that reason. I imagine the first listeners hearing the story and thinking that surely it was a mistake...a town full of Jewish households, and nobody was willing to give up their room to a woman so close to having a baby. How can that be possible? If someone had to be uncomfortable, it should not have been the pregnant woman.

We generally like to think we would do better than the people in the stories we read. But still, 2000, some-odd years later, like our ancestors, we struggle with hospitality. Many of us would rather meet at a coffee shop than invite a friend into our home. We would rather pay for a hotel room than have even relatives stay with us, especially the ones with Cousin Eddie's vibe. And yet, we all know how good it feels when we feel at home in someone else's space or in someone's presence. We want to stay awhile.

When my kids were growing up, the front yard almost always had multiple bicycles in it, indicating there were multiple kids either inside or in the backyard. Most of them would just walk right in the front door, and some would even yell, "I'm home!" They would go right to the refrigerator or the snack cupboard, get what they needed, and then join the others. It was not uncommon for me to gather dirty laundry in my kids' bedrooms and find t-shirts and sweatshirts that I did not recognize. I would wash them and have them ready when one of the boys' friends came over, asking if I knew where their red sweatshirt was. Other moms joked that clearly their child had found a new home and was planning to stay awhile.

Leading up to the story of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Luke, Mary probably felt everything except "at home." Her life had been turned upside-down. She had come face to face with an angel, learned she was unexpectedly pregnant, made the journey to visit Elizabeth, and miraculously, she had come around to an attitude of hopefulness and conviction that has been lifted up as an example for Christians for 2000 years. While she was with Elizabeth, she sang,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.
Surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name...(NRSV)

Mary waited with Elizabeth, made the journey back home, and then traveled with Joseph to Bethlehem to be registered. The day Jesus was born, she labored in a strange place; Joseph served as a midwife, for which I am sure he was woefully unprepared; the young couple wrapped Jesus in whatever they could find, laid him in a makeshift crib, and then they welcomed a gang of shepherds who busted in to see their baby.

I say this every year, but I can't help it...what woman would not want a visit from a group of dudes shortly after giving birth?

These particular dudes had stories...good stories that featured first one angel and then a flock of angels who confirmed what these parents already knew. God had birthed someone very special that night. The story says that in response to the report of the shepherds, Mary treasured and pondered their words in her heart. She didn't brush off

or breeze by what they said or quickly move on to the “what next” after they had gone. She soaked it all in. Among all the chaos of nine months full of events for which she had not planned or prepared, Mary was somehow able to embody a sense of wonder and peace. I imagine that right there, with her baby in her arms, she felt at home. She felt like she belonged...to that baby and to God. I imagine, for a moment, the world stood still, and she wished they could stay awhile in that moment, feeling like that.

Mary and Joseph were a long way from their real physical home, but they found home together with their child. That’s what we want...we want to feel at home. We want to feel at home in our physical space. And we want to feel at home in our hearts, to know that we are loved and that we belong. The story of Jesus’ birth reminds us that there is a place for all of us within the vastness of God’s love. Just as God birthed something new that night to ordinary parents, God is birthing new things in and around us all the time.

We’ve been preparing for tonight for weeks. We made a lot of plans, from where to put the candles to how we would welcome the children on this special night. We have prepared, hopefully, in ways that make it all look easy.. As part of our sermon series leading up to tonight, we’ve used this table display to help us see that week by week, as we invited, planned, and prepared, we were moving closer to this night. The table started folded up with some chairs stacked around it, and tonight, it looks like this.

As it has changed and gotten progressively fancier, we’ve wondered with the children who the table is for. One of them asked me this week if the table was set for Santa and the elves. I explained that Santa and the elves would certainly be welcome at the table but that I thought they would be really busy tonight. The truth is, this table is set for all of you. We’ve been expecting you. We wanted you to come and listen to the story of God birthing something new. We wanted you to smile when you saw our busy little nativity scene, and we wanted to sing all the carols of Christmas together. We wanted you to enjoy the glow of candles and Christmas lights and the joy on the faces of children. And more than anything, we wanted to celebrate Christmas by making sure you know there is a place for you, a place where you belong.

I don’t mean a place in this church building, although I hope you do feel at home here. I mean a place in which your heart feels at home. A place where you can rest in the truth. The truth is that you are an irreplaceable part of the story of God’s presence with us in the world. You, too, were born to reveal something to the world about God. The world needs you. The truth is that you are loved exactly as you are. You don’t have to earn God’s love by saying some magic words or believing certain things. You are already loved completely. You have been loved since the moment you came into this world. You will never ever be out of God’s reach. Please don’t brush past that truth. Don’t move on to the “what’s next,” without taking that message to heart. That is the Christmas message.

My wish for you tonight is that after whatever your Christmas is like, after it's all over, after the shepherds and angels have all gone on their way, you will have a moment in which the world stands still, and you know that without a doubt you are home and that you belong to God. And I hope you like that feeling so much that you will choose to stay a while in it and share it when you have the chance. Merry Christmas, dear ones. Enjoy every minute. Amen.