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December 15, 2024  
Luke 2: 1-20  
From the Manger: Hungering for Joy

When we left off last week, suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” Here now the rest of the story from Luke chapter 2:

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.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

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The emotions were complicated for the shepherds on that night so long ago. I think they might have been complicated for almost any one of us. For the shepherds, there was a lot to consider. They were the first witnesses – evangelists – who shared the Good News. Yes, Elizabeth had recognized that her cousin Mary would give birth to the Messiah when Mary was visiting her. But this news was shared only with Mary, who already knew it.

The shepherds, on the other hand, were tasked with sharing this news with the wider world; sharing it with people who were hungering for joy amidst a backdrop of economic uncertainty while living in an occupied territory. And the shepherds themselves were hungering for joy, for their lives were difficult. Many were hired hands, paid little to do the difficult work of tending the sheep for wealthy landowners. The work was not just grueling, it was also dangerous, as they had to protect the flock from predators – human and animal. That made the nights particularly unnerving – never knowing if an errant sound was a threat. Yes, the shepherds were hungering for joy.

And they were hungering for joy shared. For being a shepherd meant long stretches when you were alone with your thoughts as you guarded the sheep. Thoughts of loved ones who were no longer there to welcome you home; thoughts of squandered opportunities and decisions that were regretted as soon as they were made. Yes, some nights when the stars were shining brightly and the sheep were cooperative and the green grass was plentiful for feeding and the still waters for drink abundant, yes, those nights there was a sense of peace and satisfaction. But there was also loneliness and a hungering for shared community, the kind of community where one person’s laughter sets off a cascade until no one can remember just why they are laughing. Where the joy of being part of something bigger than yourself means your tears of sadness or frustration are also shared. The joy, the unbridled deeper sense of contentment

and freedom that comes with celebrating who you are and to whom you belong, was elusive. So on that night, a night filled with complicated emotions, the shepherds went with haste from the fields and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. And then scripture tells us: “When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed.”

Just who were these people who were amazed by the shepherd’s words? The classic image we have of this scene is a simple stable structure, with Mary and Joseph alone with the manger. This scene is often set outdoors, with scattered stars amongst the deep dark sky. Is that the image that came to your mind? It is the one that first pops into mine – peaceful and pastoral. A fitting place for shepherds to visit.

At yet scholars of first century Palestine tell us that Mary and Joseph were much more likely to be lodging in a home of extended family, for the scripture translated "there was no room for them in the inn," is a phrase better understood as "there was no space for them in the usual guest room of the home." You see the small town of Bethlehem was full of those returning to their ancestral home for the census. As Kelly Nikondeha shares in her book *The First Advent in Palestine* “every corner of every house hosted someone. Bethlehemites worked to make room for everyone-Joseph and Mary were no exception. ... The excitement of reunions mingled in the air alongside economic anxiety and the census, a form of communal joy functioning as resistance to imperial edicts.”<sup>1</sup>

So when the shepherds visited Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus in the manger and they made known what had been told them about this child, they were making it known to the kinfolk in the home – in a house likely bursting at the seams.

The common homes of that era were simple compounds with a series of small structures arranged around a stall where the livestock stayed at night. Some covered rooms ringed the stall, and beyond that were a few private, enclosed rooms where most of the family lived. By the time Mary and Joseph arrived, the only room available was a corner in the open stall area among the livestock, where a manger stood. As scholars note, this still was within the family compound, so Mary and Joseph were likely surrounded by a full house.<sup>2</sup> It is to this gathered group that the shepherds share the news that this baby is the Messiah, the Lord. And all who heard the news were amazed.

Like the shepherds, that gathered group was also hungering for joy. While connecting with distant family did bring joy, the reason for the gathering - the census - brought economic

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly Nikondeha. *The First Advent in Palestine. Reversals, Resistance and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope.* Broadleaf Books; 2022, p83.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Also drawn from Ken Bailey. The manger and the inn: A Middle Eastern view of the birth story of Jesus *Presbyterian Outlook*; December 21, 2006; Updated: November 27, 2023; online at <https://pres-outlook.org/2006/12/the-manger-and-the-inn-a-middle-eastern-view-of-the-birth-story-of-jesus/>

uncertainty, stress and anxiety. The census was not about generating the region's demographics. This was instead a count of each one's taxable holdings - property, livestock, crops, and household members. As scholar Kelly Nikonheda shares, "A census was always bad news for the poor, never lightening their load. ... In the opening verses of Luke 2, the most complete advent narrative in scripture, the word register or registration appears four times in quick succession. Ancient readers would know that meant the land was preoccupied with taxation. ... No one was spared, not a single villager. Luke doesn't provide an exact history so much as he creates a picture of the world Jesus was born into: economic hardship, a reign of power. The implications were that things were tight-and would soon get tighter as Caesar calculated the tribute owed to him and his functionaries."<sup>3</sup> So the people were hungering for joy amidst this backdrop.

There were complicated emotions that night in Bethlehem, and yet, and yet there **was joy**. For joy is distinct from happiness. It is deeper and richer, and more than anything it is shared. Joy can exist hand in hand with sorrow and pain. Think of the laughter emanating from a tear-stained face as stories are shared following a memorial service.

We sometimes struggle in the church to embrace a posture of joy, in spite of the fact that we sing *Joy to the World* each Christmas (and we will hear it played shortly by our Youth Instrumental Choir. Maybe it harkens back to the notion that church should be serious business – a la the Puritans and the Protestant work ethic and hard pews without cushions and fire and brimstone sermons. And yet the church should be the home of joy. I shared a quote from Frederick Buechner in the words of preparation that addresses this. Buechner says, "We tend to think that joy is not only not properly religious but that it is even the opposite of religion. We tend to think that religion is sitting stiff and antiseptic and a little bored and that joy is laughter and freedom and reaching out our arms to embrace the whole wide and preposterous earth which is so beautiful that sometimes it nearly breaks our hearts. We need to be reminded that at its heart Christianity is joy and that laughter and freedom and the reaching out of arms are the essence of it."<sup>4</sup>

I especially like that Buechner includes "the reaching out of arms." For me that is the core of joy – what the shepherds and the people of Bethlehem were hungering for – the joy of connectedness. The joy of Christmas, the joy of the celebration of Christ's birth is that it is a celebration of our connectedness. Immanuel – God with us. God chose to take on flesh and dwell with us – to live among us in feast and in famine, walking the dusty roads, healing the places in our lives that our broken. Immanuel – God with us – did not walk those roads alone. Jesus gathered disciples and friends and strangers, crowds big and small, to share in conversation, to learn from each other, to dine together. This is joy we are hungering for, the

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<sup>3</sup> Kelly Nikondeha, p 80-81.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner. *The Hungering Dark*, 1968. Quote available online at <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/10/28/touched-with-joy?rq=joy>

joy of being seen and heard and appreciated for our authentic selves. And yes, there can be complicated emotions this time of the year that make joy harder to experience. Especially when there has been a loss. When the threads of the tapestries of our life become unraveled – the death of a loved one, a fractured relationship, physical or emotional distances that can't seem to be bridged. You know the joy is lurking, you get glimpses of it; yet you just can't seem to hold on to it. Or maybe you have gotten good – too good- at pretending that you feel joy, hoping that if you fake it enough, no one will ask questions you don't want to answer. Yes, emotions can be complicated this time of the year, as we hunger for joy.

I love the Advent and Christmas season. I love the lights and the music and decorations and movies and the intentional focus on hope and peace and joy and love. I come by this affection honestly – imbued from my dad, who loved Christmas – every detail of it. So many of my childhood memories are Christmas memories – the train platform that took up a big chunk of the living room with the Lionel train passed on from his dad that encircled the Plasticville houses; my mom who loved tinsel and covered the tree until you couldn't see any green, even though our cat was forever eating (and excreting) it; the big open houses my parents hosted with work colleagues and neighbors and church friends and children galore; my dad baking cakes for the birthday party for Jesus at church. Christmas at my house growing up was loud and messy and crowded. And it was love – in the flesh – God with us - in every crazy moment.

And yet, even with all of the joyous memories, it is hard for there not to be some difficult moments. Some moments of sadness. It was just six years ago during this season that my dad was under hospice care at our house. We set up the medical bed in the living room in early December. It took Brian and I some finagling, but we got the train platform and snow village set-up. There was no question that it needed to be there. We and the hospice nurses learned how to work around the decorations. And we had to learn how to work through the emotions that this was going to be the last Christmas with my dad. Both of my brothers came that Christmas, a pretty rare event for we were spread across the country. And it was loud and messy and crowded, just like when we were kids. And there was joy – deep and real – even with the sadness accompanying those last days of my dad's life. We were hungering joy – for connection – for reminders that in life and in death and in life after death we belong to God. My dad died in the second week of January, so for me the Advent and Christmas season bring tender, and yet very joy-filled, memories. And I continue to hunger for joy.

Those gathered around the manger that night so long ago, they were hungering for joy. For the deep down sense that all is well and all will be well because we are connected to each other and connected to God. The shepherds shared their story of the good news that the baby born was to be the Messiah, the Lord. Sometimes it just takes one person – or one group - to share their story. And the floodgates open and joy spills out as others share their stories of days past and dreams for tomorrow. That is what happened on that night. Mary treasured all the words the shepherds and the kinfolk shared, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them. And there was joy in the world, for the Lord has come. Amen.