

“We’ve Only Just Begun”

The Eve of the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Luke 2:1-20

If you have not already done so, it’s time to take your place in this story—
this story you know so well,
this story that’s so easy to take for granted,
this story that happened more than two millennia ago,
this story that is as life-changing today as it was that starry night,
this story that is *your* story, too.

We begin with Caesar Augustus, the revered emperor of the great empire of Rome. None of us wants to imagine that we might bear any kind of resemblance to him. We certainly don’t have the wealth he had. But, whether we care to admit it or not, we’re no stranger to the world in which he lives and reigns. We, too, live in a society based on the belief that some people are more deserving of basic human needs than others.

We, too, live in a world where poverty is punished and achievement and blue ribbons are exalted as the penultimate signs of worth and success.

We, too, know what it’s like to believe that our best-laid plans must become *everyone’s* best laid reality.

We know the satisfaction of believing we’re right, or least being able to fool others into thinking we do.

We certainly desire to portray ourselves as successful rather than inept.

Even though you don’t have an imperial court at your feet, how different from Caesar are you?

Tonight, as Octavian Caesar Augustus awaits the latest census and ultimately his financial windfall, he goes about his business assuming that tonight will be no different than any other night.

Maybe that’s how you’ve viewed tonight and most every other day.

Maybe that’s what you want—
not everyone likes surprises.

Don’t stop paying attention though.

Perhaps though, you’re more like Joseph rather than Octavian. Maybe you’re inclined to keep to yourself and not cause a fuss. You’re the kind of person people can rely on to make things happen, and whether you admit it or not, there’s a a measure of satisfaction knowing that people can rely on you—if for nothing else than the fact that it gives you a sense of purpose and belonging.

Joseph may also be more your speed because you also know the ache he must have felt after hours of walking—for him it was the calluses and blisters on his feet and the tightness of his lower lower back. His pain may not be that different from your own, because it's not just one day's journey that you or Joseph carries—it's a lifetime of being the strong, reliable one, the one toeing the line. Tonight, as has been done before, Joseph will push aside his needs to kneel by the one who whom he doesn't want to let down. He'll wipe her tears and sweat, reminding himself that after that final excruciating push, things will settle down for a bit.

Maybe that's how you've viewed tonight or other nights—something that will peak and then one day soon fade away. Whether it's a good thing or not you don't know.

Don't stop paying attention though.

Speaking of Mary, some of you may better identify with Mary, or at least want to. For generations, we've known her to be the meek, humble maiden—and that she is.

But she's also probably scared and overwhelmed. Like her, you're in the midst of the unknown, uncertain about what the future holds and lonely in your waiting. You know there's more to the story—but there's so much to sort out.

Maybe though, you're like Mary because you have been expecting and waiting for a change that has not yet come. Everyone has told you "this too shall pass," but nothing has yet to pass.

Perhaps you still have a trickle of doubt as to whether God has called and gifted you to be a part of the unfolding of God's love in the world. For Mary it was her age, her illiteracy, her marital status. For you it's that nagging sense that you're too young, too old, too forgettable. Tonight may not be just another night for you, but like Mary, it's unclear what is real and what isn't.

Don't stop paying attention though.

Our journey continues to the pasture and the shepherds keeping watch. We don't know their names, but that's no surprise. Their work is rather unremarkable in the scheme of themes—the equivalent of a modern-day paper pusher or hourly employee. Being that they are on night watch, they're among the forgotten ones who are usually last to know what's going on. There's no reason for them to expect this night will be any different from any other night. A sheep will go here. Another there.

Can you relate to the mundane,
to not knowing what to expect,
to being a few steps behind everyone else?

If so, don't stop paying attention.

Our walk through this story culminates with all those nameless bystanders minding their own business. Luke only casually mentions them near the end as hearing the shepherds' improbable news of the birth of the Son of God. Maybe you relate to them. They can't yet grasp what this will mean for them. A baby is a baby. They have other things to attend to this night...as I am sure you do or will. So many things to think about.

Here's something you should know though:

don't stop paying attention.

Whether you are like Mary or the Emperor, Joseph or the crowds,
whether you are uncertain or indifferent,
this story is your story. This night is also your night.

In becoming one of us, God reclaimed our lives into their original purpose: wholeness and glory. Jesus came as love and lived and died of selfless love.

Jesus showed us a way not to be defined by our limitations,
our fear of not having or doing enough,
our loneliness,

of anything but the salvation of God.

Tonight we celebrate and give thanks for the way God saves us from evil's power by breaking into unknown places and forgotten people, the ones without cushy retirement accounts,

the ones without a home of their own,

the ones merely regarded as a statistic,

the ones staring into an empty bottle,

the ones written off as lazy or old.

This night neither begins or ends with you, but it is *for you and because of you*.

So, if you are struggling with weariness or the weight of too many expectations, cozy up with Mary and Joseph, who at this moment do not know if they will have a place to call home or what their future will hold. (God never said you needed to have things together to know goodness and be a conduit of it.)

If you are on cloud nine, join the angels whose hearts break into song. Bask in God's delight of your soul's peace.

If you are simply here, just here, stand with the shepherds on the night shift as they are transformed beyond their understanding and doing.

Before you were blamed,
hurt,
assigned,
educated,
married,
divorced,
widowed,
abandoned,
marked,
and labeled,
you were God's child.
That is who you'll always be.

Whoever you are,
Whatever circumstance you find yourself in tonight,
know this: tonight is not just another night.
Tomorrow is not just another day.
It is God's yes to you—a yes that began on a dusty road in a small town called Bethlehem
and on a hillside 'round the way.

To you,
is born this day, a Savior, Christ the Lord.

As to what happens next?
Well, that's yours for the taking.

Pay attention, my friends.
We've only just begun.

The Rev. Dr. Maria A. Kane
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waldorf, MD
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