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“The Child in Plain Sight”

Part V of the Sermon Series “Advent in Plain Sight”

Luke 2:1-20

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In those days a decree went out from Emperor 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 for them in the inn.

⁸ In that 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 But 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, as it had been told them.

An only child lives a well-documented life.

Photo albums just filled with precious moments. The child
kissing a dog,
sitting on Santa’s lap,
 looking absolutely adorable in an Easter outfit,
 looking absolutely filthy covered in mud,
holding a small fish on a line as if it were a prize bass,
feeding ducks at a pond...
 That’s just page 17 of Volume 2 of Year 4.

Get a parent talking about an only child—
 Goodness, that is not hard to do—
 They’ll talk about their kid
 at book club,
 at work,
 in the grocery store,
 in email and text chains,
 to the passenger in an adjoining seat on an airplane,
 to the dentist and dental assistant during a checkup,
 with a sharp instrument
 and hose in the mouth—

Get the parent talking about the only child
 and there will be an endless supply of precious memories:
 what happened on the soccer field,
 during a recital,
 on vacation...
 the craft made at school
 the funny thing said during a children’s sermon.



Yes, *well-documented is the childhood of an only child.*



The Gospel of John says that Jesus is *God's only begotten son.*

Oh, my goodness,
if we could only get Mary or God talking,
the stories that could be told of Jesus growing up—
taking his first step,
saying his first word.
The things he said that were so precious,
or cracked everyone up.

But we don't have those albums showing us the pictures,
and the Gospels don't contain the stories.

Not many of them anyway.
The Gospels only give us three.

Two of the Gospels, Mark and John, do not have a single story about Jesus as a child.
Matthew's Gospel simply reports Jesus being born,
then tells the story of the magi
leading to the report that Joseph takes his family to Egypt to keep them safe.

Luke's Gospel is the most generous.

It tells two stories:

1. One of Jesus at the Temple for something we might call today a Bar Mitzva.
2. And, of course, the story of his birth which you heard read.

We love that story.

That it's about the only real story of his childhood that we've got makes us love it more.
It is precious.



I don't think, though, that Luke meant it to be heard that way.



I don't think that when Luke tells of Jesus' birth,
he meant it to be heard as an "Isn't he precious?" memory.
I think it could not have been further from Luke's mind when he put pen to parchment
that there would be Christmas Pageants with children dressed as
Mary and Joseph,
the shepherds,
the magi,
an angel,
and even the animals.
He'd be astounded at how many manger scenes are sold and placed in
homes,
churches,
and businesses.
That Christmas cards would be mailed by the millions,
with peaceful and beautiful images of the circumstances of Jesus' birth,
would shock him.



Now, to be clear, I have no problem with how precious has become the story of Jesus' birth.
I love the charm of Christmas.
I love the feeling I get when I simply hear the stories of
Mary,
and the baby being placed in a manger,
being wrapped in swaddling cloths
and angels appearing to shepherds
with one announcing, "Unto you a child is born,"
before they all fill the sky as an angelic choir;
the shepherds finding the baby and telling all that they had seen and heard,
leaving everyone astounded,
but leaving Mary pondering it all in her heart.
... It warms me to hear it all.

It's all good, as they say.
We have theological and devotional reasons to join Mary in pondering the significance
of this news of a Son being born and a Savior given.
We *honor* Jesus by *celebrating* his birth.
The cultural glow that has been added to the story is,



in some ways,
an affirmation of Jesus' divinity.



But,
it is helpful to wonder why Luke included the account of Jesus' birth
if his objective *wasn't* to tell a precious, "Isn't he adorable?" story.

I suggest that Luke did not include the birth narrative because it was charming.
I think he included the story for its shock value.
Remember, he didn't have in mind people hearing this story every year on the same day,
always sitting with loved ones,
or memories of a parent or grandparent reading the story before they went to bed.

He was thinking of people hearing the story *for the first time*.

He anticipated that their reaction might be:

What?

God comes to us as a baby born.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph;
the God of Sarah and Leah;
the God of Moses and the Commandments;
the God of the Prophets,
comes to us as this completely dependent and vulnerable child...
all the more vulnerable because the baby is born away from home?

There is no place for this baby inside.
Brand new to the world,
breathing for the first time,
freshly birthed and cleaned,
swaddled in cloth,
placed in a feeding trough.

How fragile is this life of a baby born to be a Savior?



Can faith in God survive in such a world?



There is a reason for this story to be told.

It sets the stage for every story that follows in Luke's Gospel.

It sets the stage for how vulnerable and fragile remains the life of this Messiah.

We need to know from the get-go that life remains fragile, even with God.

Yet even in the fragility,

and even through the vulnerability,

the unbreakable love of God

and the persistent power of God to forgive and to save,

shines in this life that Jesus leads.

So, we hear the story of how

Jesus in peril as a targeted man,

still speaks with truth and acts with courage.

How he is mistreated,

and yet still forgives.

How he has to die,

and yet not even death overcomes him.

That is why Luke includes this story of Jesus' birth.

Not because Jesus is adorable,

but because God's love is both

so vulnerable and powerful;

so human, yet so divine.



Our own existence is fragile.

Often, we go through life thinking we are in control,

certain of living many tomorrows,

confident that we can handle anything that comes our way.



And that's good. We should live that way.
We should live with confidence, hope and joy.

But Luke is telling us at the very beginning that life is fragile,
and it is still to be lived with confidence, hope and joy.

This life is so worth living
because fragile though it can be,
God is with us.

That God is *Immanuel*—with us—
is what makes our vulnerable lives worth living.

I guess you could say, that is what even makes *our* lives...
precious.

