



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Hearts in Plain Sight”

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

Psalm 51:6-12 and Luke 2:8-20

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Psalm 51:6-12

- ⁶ You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- ⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
- ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Our scripture reading from the Gospel of Luke may be a familiar one this time of year—particularly if you worshiped with us on Christmas Eve. Hear these words from the gospel of Luke:



Luke 2:8-20

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.

Sermon

This fall, the Radiolab podcast shared an episode about a tiny, endangered butterfly. The species of butterfly is small, roughly the size of a quarter, and it exists only in a small region of North Carolina. To quote the host, “This story is about a tiny, fragile critter, doing its best to survive in a hostile world, and whether we should let it live or die.”ⁱ

As far as anyone knows, Fort Bragg military base in NC is the only habitat for the species of butterfly called the St. Francis Satyr. Some years ago, due to its endangered species status, the base was forced to call in an expert in conservation to make sure this butterfly survived. An enormous amount of work ensued. Grad students counted and recorded these tiny creatures, tracking their whereabouts and food sources. Experts diverted beaver dams to make sure the grass that the caterpillars ate didn’t get flooded. They made sure fires didn’t start in the meadows where the butterflies were spotted. But no matter what steps were taken, the population declined. Finally, the chief conservationist decided he needed to take a look at the only place on the base they hadn’t searched yet—the artillery field. It is a huge expanse of land that’s been off limits to people for years. No one had legally been through it in over a hundred years. For the sake of this endangered butterfly, the base allowed it.

The conservationist and his guide walked through a literal minefield—with his eyes to the air looking for the tiny, winged creatures, and the guide’s eyes steady on the ground, ensuring they avoided undetonated explosives. Finally, the team reached an untouched wetland area. When they arrived, they were shocked to find the place thriving with wildlife. They heard a cacophony of birds



around them, green grasses grew, countless orchids and other rare plants were everywhere they turned... and thousands of the St. Francis Satyr butterfly. Right where they were least expected.

For years, the base, the conservationist and his team of experts had gone to great lengths to make sure these tiny butterflies survived. There'd been no practical reason to save them; they aren't pollinators or a food source for any animal. There was no practical reason to save them, except that there are so few left in the world. The episode ends with the question, "Why should we care?"

This question has been on my mind. Why should we care?

Why should we care about the story of a tiny baby born in a stable? There's no practical reason why anyone would have noticed him, born to a lowly family, snuggled up amidst the straw.

Shepherds were among the lowliest of people. There was no bed for them either. They slept in the open, keeping an eye on the sheep. There was no practical reason anyone would pay attention to them.

Why should we care?

Teenage parents, traveling for the census, looking for hospitality and finding it in the place where the animals slept. There's no practical reason why history should remember them.

Why should we care?

The Gospel makes it clear. Because God cares. In this tiny, wriggly baby, God offered them a gift, a future, a hope in a time when hope was as endangered as the St. Francis Satyr butterfly.

And so, the shepherds followed the direction the angels gave. They found the lowly babe with his lowly family. And they told his mother all that they had seen and heard.

Mary has been on quite the journey these 9 months. The Angel Gabriel told her she is going to have a child. She traveled miles to see her cousin Elizabeth to have her confirm the angel's prediction. Now, Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem for the census—for the purpose of taxes. How ordinary, how relatable. Were you to pass her on the street, would you even notice? Why should you care?

This young woman, this teenage girl, has held a lot in these nine months. And now, strangers, shepherds from the field, arrive and tell her what they have seen and heard. It's so much to hold.

Luke tells us, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

For years, I've read this line and considered a young Mary passively gazing up toward heaven, sweetly considering all that's occurred and all she's been told. But the Greek word for



ponder—*sumbalo*—is far from passive. It’s more interesting than that. In Greek, *Balo* means “to throw,” *sum* means “with.” Ponder is a verb with a sense of the things being thrown together.ⁱⁱ Mary ponders, she considers all the things that have been thrown together—thrown at her—these last days, these last months. She wonders what on earth could all this mean for her and her baby.

How many things have been thrown at us, thrown together these last 21-22 months?

It’s not all solved. And so we ponder. We look and consider...

Where is God showing up in our world? Can we pause—to see, to recognize the places where heaven and earth are touching? Can we remember that in the midst of our ordinariness, our brokenness, the creator of the universe intrudes, and that intrusion is disruptive, but that disruption is good news?

Sometimes, there’s so much being thrown at us, it can feel overwhelming. We can wonder whether anyone cares, whether God cares. Sometimes, with the weight of things, we wonder what’s the point?

Why bother masking if we’re all going to get the virus anyway? Why bother recycling or conserving if the giant corporations in the world are dumping waste and blasting through resources without a care for the future? Why bother caring for our neighbor when our neighbor only seems to look out for himself? Does it really matter how I live?

A poor, teenage mother’s heart—a tiny, fragile Jesus—baby whose story we’ve gone to great lengths to protect—why should we care? Does this story serve any purpose any longer?

The short answer to all these questions is, of course, “yes.”

Yes, it matters—It matters because it matters to God. God cares for the lowly. Time and again, God uses the lowly, the ordinary—to reach out to the created in unfamiliar and unexpected ways.

Like the scientists and conservationists and soldiers seeking out that tiny St. Francis Satyr butterfly—like Mary listening and pondering—we learn to pay attention to the ways God may speak, whether through angels or shepherds. We learn to treasure up those holy moments where God appears in the least likely of places. We learn from Mary to ponder in our hearts the mysteries of our circumstances and God’s presence and God’s call.

No road, no life is without twists and turns, detours and dead ends. But when we remain open, we will be surprised at what we may find—hope, where we thought there was no hope, and life, where we couldn’t imagine that life could thrive.



Madeline L'Engle writes of the surprising way God breaks in... please receive this reading of her poem, "First Coming."

FIRST COMING (Madeline L'Engle)

He did not wait til he world was ready,
til people and nations were all at peace.
He came when the heavens were unsteady
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime
turned water into wine.

He did not wait til hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the word made flesh
the maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait til the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief and to touch our pain
he came with love; rejoice! rejoice!

ⁱ Latif Nasser and Rachel Cusick, producers. "Of Bombs and Butterflies," Radiolab, October 15, 2021.
<https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/bombs-and-butterflies>.

ⁱⁱ Karoline Lewis, host. "Nativity of Our Lord (II)," Sermon Brainwave Podcast, December 18, 2021.
<https://sermonbrainwave.libsyn.com/brainwave-819-nativity-of-our-lord-ii-dec-25-2021>.

