

December 24, 2019 The Nativity of our Lord – Christmas Eve
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GOSPEL

Luke 2:1-20

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the second chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph 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. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

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

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

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

There is a moment at any great occasion...when the waiting is over...and the thing we've been waiting for is suddenly here. The moment, itself, is easy to mis, though. In fact...it's one of those things that you can really only recognize once it's already happened...sort of like you can only know where an electron is after it's been there...

Even at a birth...the moment of expecting...and then laboring...becomes the moment of new life in the room. All of a sudden what we anticipated is here. Ready or not...

Eventually, we're just...as ready as we're going to be.

This season of the year always reminds me of this truth in so many humbling ways. My list is miles long...and there's no way it's all getting done...

I don't know if any of you are Downton Abbey fans. I was one of those people who was delighted about that movie coming out. In that noble household... there were people whose whole working lives were dedicated... rightly or not... to making this great house ready for the important things that would happen there.

But, I'm just me...no footman or ladies maids...just me with my little family of helpers...and when important things are going to happen...every inch is not dusted and shining...There are bags of junk shoved in the closet or room I think guests are the least likely to see.

This year we got an especially rude reminder that we won't ever really be ready in the way I'd like to imagine we will. Last Friday night the one of our

dogs who is more...shall we say...inclined towards hostility to unfamiliar furry guests...found and confronted a furry backyard visitor of an especially smelly variety. And there's basically no chance I'm going to reclaim my house from its skunking before my family gets here. A manicure and an organized pantry seem like luxuries that belong to a whole other type of person now. I just want to smell normal again. (Apologies, also...if I brought any of that smell with me tonight...I tried really, really hard not to...but again...that's how low the bar is for us now this year.)

And you know what...it's Christmas. No grinch or Scrooge or skunk or imperfectly cleaned house gets in the way. God is too determined to be close to us to be stopped by anything like that.

And, of course, if we think about it...that's how love is. It doesn't wait to come over until you've done the laundry or made the bed. It doesn't wait until you've achieved your ideal version of yourself. Love is crazy about you just the way you are...

God didn't come to earth...to this life...to live with us...in hopes that it meant we'd would get our act together and fix our mess when we heard God was on the way. It's not the Queen visiting Downton Abbey.

God comes to earth because God saw us sitting on the living room floor...crying while we randomly sprayed Febreze in various directions...because God wanted to help...figuratively speaking... I mean.

You don't have to be as ready as you think you should be. You don't have to be a different version of yourself. Christmas is here. God is here. Because God wants to be here...with you...right now...no matter what isn't done yet.

So I wonder if you'll join me in a little experiment in grace this year...If you've still got a to-do list a mile long...think about the first 5 things you can remember that are on it. And just cross one off. Don't do it. Don't do it! Because you don't have to make Christmas happen. (Stay safe of course...Take your medicine...reach out if you need support to be well...but otherwise...it's extra.)

There are so many stories we hear and internalize about who we are supposed to be...it's hard to unlearn that message of not being enough...or not doing enough...to be worthy of attention or love. But today God comes close to us to say that we are enough...enough to be close to God...enough to be part of God's work in this world...not once we have our act together...but right now...

The Christmas story isn't really amazing because of how extraordinary it is. We make a big fuss about angel choirs, virgin births, and a baby sleeping in a feed trough. But the truth is...what is extraordinary about the story is how ordinary it is. God was born in an ordinary, forgettable place...to ordinary, unimportant parents...and ordinary, smelly shepherds heard about it and came... and went out to tell the good news. God was born the way we are born. God became like us...became truly Immanuel...God with us. And it was shockingly ordinary.

God's gift is being present to us... in our ordinary-ness... not just when the music is beautifully rehearsed and the lighting carefully choreographed. God will be right there...when the junk that's hidden in the closets is spread out all over the house again... when we come on a more ordinary Sunday morning...and it's all just a little less sparkly and special.

That's what gifts are, after all, not things we earn by being put together...but things we are given in love. Maybe you've gotten enough gifts-that-weren't-really-gifts over time that it's hard to believe in the true giftedness of things.

One of my favorite TV shows has a scene where one character brings another character a latte...and then proceeds to try to ask for a favor. The character holding the latte looks back down at their cup, squinting...and pinches something off of it...saying, "Well...would you look at that...there was a string attached to my latte..."

And he wasn't wrong of course. It was more of a bribe than a gift.

Sometimes we get gifts with too many strings attached. They become burdens. And...sometimes...people don't mean gifts to be that way...but we still worry...we worry about what is expected in response.

My huge anxiety is around thank you notes. I'm just...I'm horrible about them. I don't write them...hardly ever...at all. I feel like I should, and I want to...and I don't. I'm sure I could work on that in therapy for a long time, and maybe I will. But I remember...distinctly...one of the first conversations I had with someone...someone who had given me something lovely as a gift...and I said thank you again...and sort of shamefully confessed that I had meant to write a note...but I just never seem to manage to write them. And she said, "Oh my gosh. Neither do I. I don't need you to write a note! I'm just glad you like it." And she really was. And I could tell. And I almost cried. I was so relieved that she believed my gratitude... and didn't resent that I didn't express it in a certain way.

Sometimes when you realize a gift is really a gift, it kind of knocks you back, you know?

Like, you won't be mad if I don't give you something as good back? Or say thank you in just the right way...that's worthy of what you've done? You just gave it to me because you love me and thought I'd like it? That I needed it?

Wow.

God's gifts are like that.

That's what we mean by that churchy word "grace." No strings attached. Not a bribe. Just love.

God loves us so much. That Love has come. Love is the gift tonight. Christ is born. Merry Christmas.

Amen.