

## Examining the Facets

Happy Christmas.

Or maybe that should be Adequate Christmas?

I don't know about you, but I was really looking forward to being in the Worship Space with my Parish Family and Online with my "From Away" Parish Family. Then this Omicron variant got nasty, quickly and difficult decisions needed to be made.

I've been feeling quite down about it, and while, logically, I know it was the right decision to make, it still disappoints me. It is what it is.

Has anyone heard this gospel before? Maybe once or twice? Watching me "sign" the gospel, did it make anything seem different? Do you hear the gospel, or did you "see" something too?

I love this gospel. I love it for many reasons, and not just because we hear it most years.

Firstly, the census. The emperor wants everyone counted so they all have to go back where they are from to be counted. We have it a little easier these days. Last census form I completed online AND I got the short form.

Back to the gospel...and of course everyone complied...as far as we are told, everyone complied.

So Joseph has to take his heavily pregnant fiancé from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It is 90 miles or roughly 145 kilometers. It is believed it took them roughly five days to walk that distance. That's 18 miles a day. That may not sound like much, but remember Mary was days away from giving birth, and would be walking between 8 and 10 hours a day in difficult, hilly terrain. Can you IMAGINE?

At the pace I meander, it would likely take me closer to 12 hours to walk 18 miles in a day. And no thanks, I don't want to test that out just now.

The Emperor says, "everyone go 'home', you need to be counted". Joseph and Mary walk to Bethlehem, the City of David.

Next, it's time for her to give birth. We're not told specifics, for which I am eternally grateful...let's just say, her water breaks and...umm...she gives birth.

Joseph didn't call ahead; ironic isn't it? They were going to be registered, but he forgot to register for a room. I know, there was no telephone, let me have this ironic moment, please –

The only place for them to rest and prepare for the birth is in a stable because there was no room at the inn. This should tell us that Joseph and Mary were no big deal in their day.

I mean, had those around them known that Mary was the light-bearer and was actually carrying the Messiah IN HER WOMB, the red, er, carpet would have been rolled out for them. Someone from a lesser station would have been displaced to give her the best bed in the place. Yet that didn't happen.

They're in the stable, surrounded by animals. Can you imagine the smell?

Next, the angel appears to the shepherds. Why Shepherds?

They were hanging out in the fields, looking after their flocks. Sheep, I understand, are stubborn animals, with individual personalities, and they all recognise the sound of their shepherd's voice. It doesn't mean they necessarily listen to their shepherd's voice, but they certainly will NOT follow the voice of someone other than their shepherd.

The angel unceremoniously appears before them. \*POOF\* instant angel. And in true angelic form, they are greeted with the ubiquitous "Be Not Afraid", yet it's too late because we are already informed that these poor shepherds are "terrified". Well, I guess so!

Imagine it...a heavenly being, the size of a grown man, dressed perhaps in white, with wings longer than their handspan. Suspended from the sky, surrounded by a bright, shining light. That came OUT OF NOWHERE! Keep in mind, this is before the days of Steven Spielberg and CGI. There was absolutely NO FRAME OF REFERENCE for these Shepherds seeing the angel.

One moment they are going about their usual Shepherding duties, watching the stars, walking the perimeter of where the flocks were, when suddenly...ALL OF A SUDDEN...some dude in a dress is suspended in the air. Actually, that's not nice is it...the dude's name is Gabriel.

"Be not afraid". Ironic? And why shepherds? I mean, shepherds in those days were ordinary people, like Mary and Joseph. They did their shepherding things away from most villagers and city folk. They lived in the fields with their flocks. Chances are they enjoyed the company of sheep more than people...I'm quite sure I would too...no offence to anyone.

The angel appears to the Shepherds who are bricking it – and THEN they are given the news of the most significant birth that has ever taken place. THEY ARE THE FIRST ONES TO HEAR OF JESUS' BIRTH.

The Shepherds are told where to find this blessed baby. I'm thinking there won't be too many babies born in stables, but hey, it's not my story, it's the angel's announcement. And to round off the incredibly strange night, a choir of angels appears to the Shepherds and sings to them. Why not?

Then just as they appeared, they disappeared, back to heaven, we are told.

So, the shepherds decide, once the shock of all this has lessened, that they want to check out the angel's story. So they head with haste, following the instructions the angel's had given them, and just like that they find the Holy Family. And they tell Mary and Joseph what they had seen, the angels and the chorus and the blessing and the reference to this blessed child.

My favourite part of this gospel –

- is not the magnificent picture it paints in my imagination.
- it's not the shock I imagine on the shepherd's faces.
- it's not the song of the angel chorus
- it's not the words of wonder and blessing told to Mary
- it's what she does with them...
- she takes all these words and treasures them. She ponders them in her heart.

This seemingly simple story is, in fact, multi-faceted.

There's the facet of the mundane - Mary and Joseph have to go and get registered.

There's the facet of the regular - Being no other place, Mary gives birth in a stable. There's no crib, so she uses a food trough. No fleece blankets, she uses clean straw. No hand knit layette, she uses strips of cloth.

There's the facet of the ordinary - Angels chose shepherds to deliver the most blessed news of the extraordinary birth of Jesus.

THEN

There's the facet of the special - Mary and Joseph, two nobodies from nowhere, have to travel to the city of David, the place of Joseph's birth, to give birth to their miracle baby. They didn't merit a special room, because they didn't need it.

There's the facet of the spectacular - Mary didn't need state of the art birthing rooms, bassinets, and embroidered onesies. She used what she had because the child himself was spectacular.

There's the facet of the extraordinary - Angels chose the shepherds because they were humble beings who would hear the message and receive it, not with distrust or ambivalence, but with great joy. And what's more they would share that incredible news, including with Mary and Joseph.

What makes this story so incredible is that it shows God's absolute love for all of us. I have often struggled with why God chose me to be a priest. I am certainly not a special, spectacular or extraordinary person.

I am, without a doubt, mundane, regular and ordinary. And yet, I believe I have been chosen to walk with God's people in the Elk Valley and beyond.

God didn't choose the famous or the most educated or the wealthiest.

God chose the mundane of places, the regular of people, the ordinary of witnesses and then changed all of their lives irrevocably...just as God has, can and will change our lives irrevocably.

So as we harrumph through another lock-down Christmas, let us sit in the discomfort of unexpressed disappointments, loneliness, and sadness.

Let us remember that God took an ordinary day, in an ordinary place and chose an ordinary young woman to give birth to the greatest gift ever given - love coming down to earth. God chose regular folk, doing regular work to announce this incredible birth.

Just as God made the ordinary extraordinary, God can also change the mundane in us into something fabulous.

Happy Christmas to us all. God's greatest blessings to you and yours.

Amen.

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent  
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry  
Christ Church Anglican and Fernie Knox United  
Fernie, B.C.

Sermon for Christmas Day  
25 December 2021  
Luke 2.1-20