

Anyway
Matthew 2:1-12 Luke 2:1-7

Our two readings from Matthew and next from Luke are a good reminder to us of the uniqueness of each of the gospel writers' approach to their gospel, and the audience to which they were writing. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John aren't just 4 random accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. Each writer carefully crafts their account so that they highlight the life and work of Jesus in a unique way, for a unique audience.

Matthew, for example, is a Jewish follower of Jesus trying to convince his fellow Jewish folk that Jesus is the promised Messiah—that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament has said and promised. So... there are more quotes from the O.T. in Matthew's gospel than there are in the other gospels combined. Another purpose for Matthew, though, is to show that this Jewish messiah is bringing good news to non-Jewish people—to the Gentiles. Jesus will not be the exclusive messiah for Jewish people only, but for *all* people.

This is why we celebrate epiphany every year, because right away in Matthew's narrative, following the birth of Jesus, non-Jewish people appear on the scene, these magi, who realize that the gospel is for them too. And by the way, a little historical footnote here: there would not have been just 3 magi. At

the risk of deconstructing “we three kings” and ruining all that we’ve been told and all that we have believed and sung about over the centuries, there is no evidence that it was exactly 3, except for the fact that 3 gifts were offered. Matthew only says “magi” (plural) came. And magi, who were Persian astronomers, were from a priestly and wealthy class of people. And wealthy people never, ever, travelled alone. They always brought servants with them to do things like make meals, set up their tents, take care of their animals, and provide security from thieves. So, more likely, this could have been 7 magi with 20 servants.

This makes sense of what Matthew says, when he tells us that all of Jerusalem was thrown into a tizzy when they arrived. 3 people arriving quietly wouldn’t have caused a stir. 25-30 people who needed to book 10 air bnb’s or an entire hotel would have caused a stir: “Why have all of these people come here?”

Anyway, there is your historical context to that story.

Speaking of historical context, we come now to Luke’s gospel. Luke, at the very beginning of his gospel, says this: “After investigating everything thoroughly, I have decided to write a more orderly account.” So, Luke is like an investigative journalist, or a historian, whose aim is to set the life and ministry of Jesus into a historical and factually more detailed context. Luke has other special emphases,

like elevating the stories of the women who followed Jesus and were ministered to by him, and paying extra attention to Jesus' healing ministry, but for our purposes this morning we will see that Luke places the birth of Christ in historical context, and pays attention to details that the other gospel writers don't. One of those details of which I'll be reflecting on this morning. On to our reading...

This reading, which you've probably heard a couple times already this season, always makes me think of Linus in the Charlie Brown Christmas special, when the pageant that he's trying to direct turns to chaos, and getting everyone to work together was like herding cats. And so, Charlie Brown cries out, *"Isn't there someone who can tell me what Christmas is all about??"* And Linus takes center stage and tells the story:

Luke 2:1-7

2In 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 room for them in the inn.

This is the word of the Lord.

I'd like to draw our attention this morning to Luke's little detail of the Christmas story that called out to me for deeper reflection. It's often a cute part of the Christmas pageant when children portray it, yet when we slow down and contemplate this part of the story, it becomes largely impactful. That is, as Joseph and very pregnant Mary make the journey to Bethlehem because of the census, and perhaps *because of the census* that Bethlehem was crowded, that *there was no room for them in the inn*.

There was no room for them in the inn. This isn't just a sentimental detail in the story that forces this poor family to find the nearest stable. What it tells us is, that in spite of the crowded town of Bethlehem, *God comes to earth anyway*. The filled-up hotels and motels and air b & b's and hostels with signs of "no vacancy" did not prevent God from coming to earth. It did not prevent God from being born into this world. God did not *turn away*. God came to us, *anyway*.

What if this could be an accurate description of our crowded, confused, chaotic world right now? Where so many lives are busy and full and people seem to be in such a hurry. What if what happened in Bethlehem is also a description of what happens in many of *our* lives? What if there really is no room in this world today for Jesus, amidst peoples' crowded schedules? Or our crowded

hearts and minds with all that worries us, distracts us, and causes us to be preoccupied? What if there is no room for Jesus' gracious words amidst the endless chatter of social media and 24/7 television? In one of his brilliant poems, TS Eliot asks a question (and then answers it): "Where will the Word be found, where will the Word resound? Not here; there is not enough silence." And he wrote that in 1930!

Or how about the things that are going on internationally, and the way we as human beings treat each other? It seems that there's no room in the inn. And sometimes it feels like there is no break from it all.

What if there is no room for Christ's coming kingdom in our nation's political power struggles? No room for Mary's vision of the day when the hungry will be fed, and the lowly will be lifted up. No room in our world for the angels' promise of peace on earth, good will to all.

Yet... *what if...* this Christmas story is the story of the loving God who refuses to be deterred by the "no vacancy" signs that are put up everywhere. What if the *main narrative* is about the persistent God who is determined at all costs to be Emmanuel, God with us.

Amidst the cry of “no room in the inn,” God comes to us anyway. God is born anyway. God pursues us anyway. Jesus is with us always, anyway.

Contemporary contemplative Thomas Merton, in reflecting on this, wrote: “Into this world, this sin-filled and broken inn, in which there is no room for him, Christ has come uninvited. It is not the last gasp of exhausted possibilities, but the first taste of all that is beyond conceiving.”

The story of Christmas is nothing less than the amazing and wonderful announcement of the God who never stops his search for people, in and through whom God wants to bring new hope, in and through whom God wants to bring peace on earth, in and through whom God wants to bring new life.

We often talk about humanity’s search for God, a person’s search for Jesus. But what if this story is really about God’s search *for us*? God’s relentless pursuit of humanity?

Like in one account in John’s gospel, when Jesus approaches a man with an infirmity and asks him, “Do you want to be made well?” Jesus is the one who initiates, approaches him, and asks the question. And it’s a really good question for all of us, if we take time to think about it. Well, after a short conversation, most of which revealed this man’s self-pity, Jesus heals him *anyway*. He didn’t ask for it, he didn’t approach Jesus. Jesus just showed up and healed him.

And that account reminds me of the story that one of my favorite writers, Anne Lamott, tells, of how she became a Christian, following years of addiction and self-harm. She recalls the fevered days after one traumatic experience when, sitting curled up in the corner of her room, drunk and bleeding from an injury, she noticed a stray cat sitting at the doorstep of her front door, which she had left open for some reason. The cat had followed Lamott everywhere, for days, down the street and to the liquor store; to her dealer's hideout, and now, this cat shows up at her doorstep. This calm, curious, and unceasingly present... cat.

The cat, as Anne Lamott tells it, felt like Jesus. And that one day, while sitting on the floor, drunk and bleeding and wishing it would all just come to an end, after the cat came to her door, sat itself down, and just stared at her, with God-like attention and affection, Lamott confessed: "The heck with it. I give up. Come on in." She used more colorful language than that, but you get the idea.

She writes about this later: "I did not mean to be a Christian. I have been very clear about that. My first words upon encountering the presence of Jesus for the first time 25 years ago, were, "I would rather die." I really would have rather died at that point than to have my wonderful, brilliant, liberal, non-believer friends know that I had begun to love Jesus. I think they would have been less

appalled if I had developed a close personal friendship with George Bush. At least there is some reason to believe that George Bush is a real person.

But I never felt like I had much choice with Jesus; he was relentless. I didn't experience him so much as the *hound* of heaven, as the old description has it, as the *alley cat* of heaven, who seemed to believe that if it just keeps showing up, mewling outside your door, you'd eventually open up and give him a bowl of milk. Of course, as soon as you do, you are in for it, and the next thing you know, he's sleeping on your bed every night, and stepping on your chest at dawn to play a little push-push.

I resisted as long as I could, like Sam-I-Am in "Green Eggs and Ham" — I would not, could not in a boat! I could not would not with a goat! I do not want to follow Jesus, I do not want... expensive cheeses. Or something. Anyway, he wore me out. He won.

I was tired and vulnerable and he won. I let him in. This is what I said at the moment of my conversion: I said, "The heck with it. I quit. Come in." He started sleeping on my bed that night. It was not so bad. It was even pretty nice. He loved me, he didn't shed or need to have his claws trimmed, and he never needed a flea treatment. I mean, what a savior, right? Then, when I was dozing, tiny kitten that *I* was, *he* picked *me* up like a mother cat, by the scruff of my neck, and deposited

me in a little church across from the flea market in Marin's black ghetto. That's where I was when I came to. And then I came to believe." (a couple of lines from AA)

I love it that God used a cat to lovingly pursue her, and bring Jesus to her. If God can use a star to lead magi to Jesus, why not a cat? God can do whatever God wants to do, right?

Again, the story of Advent and Christmas is nothing less than the amazing and wonderful announcement of the God who never stops his search for people, in and through whom God wants to bring new hope, in and through whom God wants to bring peace on earth, in and through whom God wants to bring new life.

But here's the deal. In order to discover this, we have to leave the commotion and anxiety of the inn, and find our way back to the manger. That is, we have to enter into the humility, and the simplicity, and the patience, and the delicate and wonderful nature of what's unfolding there—and of what's unfolding in our hearts—to discover where God is being born in our life.

And in this kind of prayerful attentiveness, in the quietness and simplicity, we are then asked to bring that wonderful simplicity out into the commotion and anxiety of the world—as people who have recognized and experienced the God

who has pursued us in Jesus Christ, and brought us peace and love and joy and new life.

Much like Joseph Mohr did when he wrote Silent Night 207 years ago. Joseph Mohr wrote Silent Night in 1818 originally as a poem, before he enlisted his friend and composer Franz Gruber to set it to music. Amidst the commotion and violence of the Napoleonic wars in Europe, accompanied by famine, in “a time of great stress” as one historian called it, Joseph Mohr found his way back to the manger—to the quietness and simplicity of it, and the awe-inspiring nature of what God was doing in coming to earth in spite of everything that was going on. Or, perhaps, *because* of it. He found there a calmness and a peacefulness, a light of love, for himself, which then found its expression back to the world, and to us, in the form of this simple and beautiful Christmas carol that we’re about to sing again. We always sing this on Christmas eve, but why not on a Sunday morning to remind us of the peacefulness and calmness of the coming of God into the world... anyway.

There is a 4th verse that we don’t normally sing on Christmas eve that has a little reference to the star guiding the magi, and us.

Let’s remain seated while we sing, and prepare to receive the sacrament of communion this morning.

