

Meanwhile...

Micah 2:2-5 and Luke 2:1-7

Luke 2:1-7

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

This is the word of the Lord.

One of our favorite tv show hosts, a comedian, has a segment on his show titled “Meanwhile.” This segment usually happens partway into the show. He begins the show with all the big headline news of the day and does his comedic spin on those big stories. Then after commercial he comes back to do the “Meanwhile” segment, on many of the shows. Not all of them, but it’s a pretty popular piece so he does it frequently.

The idea of the “meanwhile” segment is, while all of these other big events are taking place which occupy the headline news and have our attention...

meanwhile, here are some other things that happened that didn’t make the news,

which is why you probably hadn't heard about them. They are usually something that happened that was silly or ridiculous, or about a discovery that was made that he puts a funny spin on. For example, amidst political news, major weather events, and legal decisions of major cases... *meanwhile...* traffic came to a standstill on a California highway this week due to hundreds of rolls of toilet paper that fell out of a delivery truck and onto the roadway. Either a huge accident, or a public service to everyone stuck in traffic all day. *Meanwhile...* a Coca Cola fan collects 11,308 *different* Coke cans and bottles, breaking the Guinness World Record for different cans and bottles issued by the soft drink company over the years, and collected by one person. That's impressive, but the real winner here is diabetes. Stuff like that.

Sometimes the stories are touching. For example: *meanwhile...* a police officer pulls over a teenager who is driving erratically, to find out that the kid was trying to tie his tie on the way to pick up his date for the spring dance. He was running late, and looked a mess when he got pulled over, so the police officer has him get out of the car, and then teaches him how to tie his tie, spiffs him up so his looks good, and then sends him on his way. With a warning, of course. That story won't make the headlines, but it should.

As we begin the season of Advent and prepare for and contemplate the coming of Christ to earth, and as we hear the story of Christmas once again, I am reminded that all of the events surrounding the Christmas story, from Gabriel's visit to Mary, to Jesus' birth in the manger, are "meanwhile" types of events. *We think of these as headlines* because we know the story so well, and have heard it so often, and it's part of the décor at this time of year in many homes and in churches—indoors and outdoors (there are a lot of nativity scenes in a lot of front yards each year!). It's become a center stage production. So it's easy to forget that none of what happened actually made any kind of headlines or was witnessed by, or heard of by, more than a small handful of people, who were on the margins of society. In places of refuge, wilderness, and poverty.

If there was a newspaper back then, say, the Jerusalem times, or Palestine press, the Bethlehem daily news, the headlines would have been about Caesar's attempts to expand the Roman Empire, or King Herod building yet another luxury mansion on the Mediterranean coast (using slave labor of course), or the invention of another amazing feat of engineering by the Romans (aqueducts that can make water travel uphill; how do they do that?!). The headlines would've contained political intrigue and assassinations in the quest for power.

This is what gospel writer Luke is doing when he tells us about Emperor Augustus declaring that a census be taken, and Quirinius being the governor of Syria. These are a couple of the the major players and the headline-makers that Luke tells us about as he puts the Christmas story in its historical context.

Meanwhile... an angel appears to Mary in the quietness of a private moment, and then spoke to Joseph in a dream while he's sleeping. *Meanwhile...* the holy family travels to Bethlehem and a baby is born in a stable. *Meanwhile...* shepherds are out in a field... *meanwhile...* magi see a star and begin to follow it.

These are not headline events. They took place on the margins and in relative obscurity. Yet, they are The Good News, and without them the world is not transformed. *You and I* are not transformed.

I remind us of this, because the good news of Christmas is that God doesn't create headlines as God moves toward the world in love. And... God's desire is not to create a big splash as God works in *our* lives either. We often crave headlines because that's what we've been conditioned to want; but in our hunger for headlines—or because of the shiny objects that cause distraction—we easily miss the small and out of the way appearances and movements of God in our lives, and in the world—on the margins. Or, as one of my spiritual directors used

to say, “on the fuzzy edges.” This is where God often appears, and seems to prefer to work. On the fuzzy edges. Pay attention to the fuzzy edges, she used to tell me. Try to become aware of God’s movements in your peripheral vision.

In a moment we will sing O Little Town of Bethlehem, which contains the line, “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.” Philips Brooks, who wrote that carol for the children of his church, got it right. Although, practically speaking, it couldn’t have been a completely silent night—angels singing in the fields would’ve been less than quiet; and a woman giving birth, well...; not to mention a baby crying. The point is, it took place on the margins, away from the hustle and bustle of major happenings, in relative silence from the noise of the seemingly more important things happening at that time.

“How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so (in the same way, silently) God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.” Phillips Brooks was onto something there.

Because it does require a kind of humility, and a lot of trust, to step away—even if only momentarily—from the hustle and bustle and shiny objects and noise of the big events, or from the desire for headline type of information, to find the

“meanwhiles” of our lives, and in our neighborhoods, where God silently slips in to bring some light, some peace, some healing, some reconciliation, some moment of refreshment and joy. To plant some seeds of hope for the future.

Can we pause, and quiet ourselves long enough to see? To listen? To reflect? so we can put some *smaller* puzzle pieces together to help us eventually see a bigger picture? That seems like a tall order because the headline events and headline makers are yelling for our attention, especially if we’re on social media or cable news. But it is possible! And, it is necessary.

We need these small, out-of-the-way encounters with God, and we need to hear the stories of the out-of-the-way movements of God to help us keep hope alive, and remind us that God is still present and at work, even when things look grim.

Things looked grim in the days of Caesar Augustus, and Quirinius, and Pontius Pilate, and the narcissistic and violent king Herod...

Meanwhile... Jesus gathered with his disciples in an upper room to celebrate the Passover, without fanfare or spectacle, and as they broke bread together Jesus said, “Remember me.”