

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | Luke 2:1–20

Date | December 24, 2021, Christmas Eve



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Merry Christmas everyone! It is such a deep joy to be able to say that to you all, gathered here once more in this holy place on Christmas Eve. For here we have the chance to listen to the voice of Love, the love that calls us into a bigger story, a larger vision of who we are and how we are called to live. And if this is the first time you have been here in a long while, know that we've missed you.

Welcome home.

One of my favorite All Saints' traditions this time of year is our 'non-anxious Christmas pageant'. Perhaps some of you were here last week to see it. Non-anxious because it is barely rehearsed, with zero-pressure to perform, and if not everything goes to plan, well that was the plan to start with.

The Christmas pageant was a staple of my own school days in England. I have some distant memory as a 1st or 2nd grader being dressed in a table cloth, with a tea towel wrapped around my head held on by an elastic band – the universal costume of wannabe shepherds – which was fine because everyone else was absurdly dressed too. Yet no one was quite as well-dressed as the magi, those wise travelers from the East we'll hear more about at Epiphany. Unlike the shepherds, the magi got accessories to carry, gifts thickly coated in gold and silver paint and lavishly decorated with all manner of sparkling gems. They had their highly impressive lines to deliver as they prostrated themselves before the baby Jesus. I suppose I hoped that one day I too would get to wear a fancy costume on Christmas Eve. Be careful what you wish for.

One of the many beautiful things about children is that they don't tend to get hung up on getting the words exactly right, the same way adults do. My favorite story of a school Christmas pageant gone awry goes like this. Three boys come in, splendidly dressed, and with great dramatic effect lay down their bejeweled boxes before Mary and Joseph. The first boy says, "I bring you gold." The second boy says, "I bring you myrrh." And the third boy takes his turn and says, "Frank sent this." No idea that there was anything wrong. As far as he knew, that was the story and he was sticking to it.

I love that tale because although I am fairly confident that Frank is not a character that ever makes it into the Bible, I am also pretty sure that the little boy who decided to draft Frank into the nativity scene had no sense that he should be worried about what he had added. It's like the story I heard of a seven year old, proud she had memorized the Lord's Prayer, which for her began as follows, 'Our Father, who art in heaven, Harold is his name'. Utterly priceless.

What's wonderful about all of these childhood slip-ups is how they open the door to the question of whether the story we tell ourselves about God is actually the one, in Christ, we are invited to enter. For it is so easy to get the story about God wrong.

A few years ago I learned for the first time that the image I had been carrying with me all these years about the nativity story has been wrong. For most of my life, the picture that had been painted for me was one where a lack of room meant that Mary and Joseph were shuffled off to the margins for Jesus' birth, to the place where animals slept in some sort of farmyard shed. I suppose it fit the theology I had built around Jesus: champion of the poor; God incarnate among the least of the Earth.

Yet recent scholarship suggests that the consequence of there being no room for Mary and Joseph to be paying guests, was not that they were forced to dwell where only animals would usually spend the night, instead it is more likely that they were welcomed into the innkeeper's home. It was common in 1st century Palestine, partly because animals were so valuable, for people and animals to share the same room – animals on the floor with people sleeping on some sort of structure above them.

In other words, the nativity story is not one of scarcity - where an innkeeper can do no better than put the holy family with the animals – it is one of abundant generosity, where a stranger welcomes this young couple into the heart of his home. The story was much bigger than I had imagined. Mary and Joseph don't birth Jesus alone, but amidst the goodness and hospitality of others. All these years, I had got the story wrong.

I wonder, what stories you have been telling yourself about God? Is your God the One who invites you into the tenderness of God's abundant love, or are you still stuck with the story of a God who asks you to measure up, or to prove your righteousness, or to tell others how they are missing the mark?

Chances are we all get the story wrong in some place or other. There's no doubt that we get the story wrong about each other. Just think back to the last time you sat in a church on Christmas Eve and ask yourself if since that time the story you have been telling about the world we live in and the people you live among is actually the right one. For surely there is more mystery, more depth, more beauty – certainly there is more divinity – in any one of us than we often recognize.

The truth is, the stories the world inclines us to tell about one another are just too small. For the labels we too easily affix on others are entirely incommensurate with the vast vision of fullness that God sees in each of us. And there is no political persuasion, no social circle, no level of expertise or homespun wisdom that is sufficiently insightful for us to see the whole story of what it means to be human, and far, far short of the boundless wonder that God sees in you.

This Christmas Eve, might I invite you into a bigger story? The story of the God who loves you immeasurably. The story of the infinite power of tenderness and compassion. The story of the God who is not waiting for you to be good enough, but who accepts you now to welcome you home, where you have always belonged. And may I invite you not merely to hear that story but to consider today/tonight that you might live into it.

The good news of God born as a vulnerable babe is that we don't have to get all of our lines right in order to belong. We don't have to perform our way into the Kingdom of God. We just need ears to hear that we too are welcomed into the heart of the home we have been looking for. That we too have a part in God's bigger story. I pray that you may know the light of Christ's birth in your life today. The Lord has come. What happens next in the story is up to you.