

This is the night, the night for which we have been waiting, and watching, filled with expectation – this is the night. This is the night when the claim that is unique to ours among all religions is made. It is a miracle of epic proportions, the type of event that commands really bold headlines, breaking news of the best sort. After all, this is the entrance of the divine being into human history. Our theologians call it the mystery of the Incarnation. God takes on human flesh. God becomes one of us – true God and truly human. St. John put it this way: “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of a Father’s only Son.” Such events should star great people, and should be accompanied by great fanfare. But whom does God choose to help to accomplish the miracle? They really do seem an unlikely cast of characters.

Let’s take a look. Oh, sure, there are the Emperor Augustus and King Herod, and later three elegant Eastern astrologers, but the rest of the characters are very, very unexpected.

There is Mary, a teenage peasant girl with absolutely no life experience, certainly not any experience raising a child. And she’s not even married. Engaged yes, but not married. She’s from a small village in the northern part of the country with not much to commend it. People used to ask, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth,” that is, if they had even heard of Nazareth. To this small town, teenage girl, God entrusts the future of the human-divine relationship.

Joseph seems a nice enough man – man enough to stay with Mary even though she turns out to be pregnant before they get married. But Joseph is a small town craftsman – a carpenter with little education. He is a nice man, but.... Not exactly the stepfather one might choose for the Son of God. But to Joseph, God entrusts the education and training of the boy child.

What about the innkeeper? He is probably a typical small town small business owner who is just trying to satisfy everyone who made reservations at his inn during this Roman census. It’s not his fault that Joseph didn’t reserve a room. It’s not his fault that there is no room for them in his inn. And if we want to get technical, an innkeeper is not mentioned in the Bible story anyway. In reality, there are plenty of rooms in Bethlehem; it’s just that no one is willing to give up their room for these travelers.

And the angels? What about the angels? Forget about those cute and fluffy little Hallmark angels. These angels are frightening messengers from heaven. They must be because invariably their first words to humans are “fear not!” Any being whose first words have to be, “Do not be afraid,” should never be involved in a publicity project.

Then there are the shepherds – who would think that they would be the first to hear of the birth? The incarnation of God revealed to shepherds! Shepherds lived on the margins of society – they were considered dirty and undesirable. And these are the ones whom the angels in all the scary glory of the heavens appear on that night of nights. And they are the ones who are chosen to make the story known. The shepherds were chosen to be the first to carry the message out to a world hungry for Good News. Totally unexpected.

From the beginning, it is the unexpected who are called and who respond. And all who heard the news were amazed – amazed at the news and amazed that God would choose shepherds to announce it.

These unexpected messengers may have amazed those who first heard the news from them, but we too can be amazed at the way the story unfolds. Anne Weems, in her poem, “Unexpected” puts it this way:

Even now we simply do not expect  
to find a deity in a stable.  
Somehow the setting is all wrong  
the swaddling clothes too plain  
the manger too common for the likes of a Savior,  
the straw inelegant,  
the animals, reeking and noisy,  
the whole scene too ordinary for our taste.

And the cast of characters is no better.  
With the possible exception of the kings,  
who among them is fit for this night?  
the shepherds, certainly too crude.  
the carpenter too rough  
the girl too young  
And the baby!  
Whoever expected a baby?  
Whoever expected the advent of God in a helpless child?

Had the Messiah arrived in the blazing light of the glory  
of a legion of angels wielding golden swords,  
the whole world could have been conquered for Christ  
right then and there.  
and we in the church – to say nothing of the world!  
wouldn't have so much trouble today.  
Even now we simply do not expect  
to face the world armed with love.

We simply do not expect... Maybe our expectations are too low. Do we expect that God works or acts the way we do? Do we expect that God's value system is like ours - that what we lightly value, God does too? Perhaps, but remember that

God turns our value system on its head. God values, above all, those whom we might see as the least, the lost, and the last. And God uses them to accomplish great things. Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds could be used by God to help to bring about God's good purpose for humanity. And God used them despite the low esteem in which their fellow human beings held them. For to God, they were of infinite value.

Our faith teaches that in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, God joined to human flesh to usher in a whole new era of human history, a whole new relationship with human beings. Of all the babies born in all the towns in all the years in the whole world, this birth was to be seen as different. This infant would grow up to be the one we call Savior, in whom we see the human face of God, what God is like, and we see the perfected person, what we are created to be.

But, a baby! Perhaps a baby is the most surprising, the most unexpected, of God's choices of characters in this story.

Or perhaps we are.

For we have a role in God's story, too. For tonight/today, God, who favors the unexpected ones, entrusts us with that story. Not feeling worthy or up to the task? Imagine how Mary, and Joseph and the shepherds felt about themselves. Yet God entrusted these unexpected people with the story of God's grace, God's love and God's peace. Like our spiritual ancestors – Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds – God chooses us to bear the child into the world.

Centuries ago in a sermon for Christmas, Meister Eckhart wrote,

“Here in time we make a holiday because the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity is now born in time, in human nature. St. Augustine says this birth is always happening. But if it happens not in me what does it profit me? What matters is that it shall happen to me.”

What matters is that it shall happen to me. When we sing the carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem” we will sing and pray “O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray; cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.” Be born in us today. We have been traveling to Bethlehem all through Advent. Our journey will have been for nothing and the promise of Christmas will be an empty promise if we simply stop by the manger, nod at Mary and Joseph, say what a lovely baby, and then go on with our lives as if nothing had happened that mattered to us.

Even if you are not sure what you believe about Jesus, or cannot find the words to express the faith you do have, perhaps deep down inside of you is the hope that the story is true. True for you. I want to say this to each of us. It is. True. The details of the story matter not so much as the heart of the story. The Christmas story is a love story beyond all others. The message of the Christmas story is the truth that the Holy One who created the earth and the heavens – and each of us – our God – loves us, values us, trusts us, is with us, and will never,

ever let us go. To God, no matter who you are, where you are from, what you have or have not done, or how many times you've been born, you are precious, you are beautiful, and you are of infinite value.

So, let Christ be born in you today. Let what God did in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago matter to you today. Let Christ be born in you today because what matters is that it shall happen to us. Let Christ be born in us today.

Mother Teresa once said

"It is Christmas every time you let God love others through you."

And that is how we bear the child into the world, how we make known the message of Christmas. Beyond the lights and the decorations and the good food and the trees and the travel, and the gifts, beyond all the modern trappings of this holiday lies a holy day. The message of this holy day tells of God's vision for us, God's dream for us that we will let God love others through us. Christmas, then, is not so much something that we do. It is something that we are created to be.

May you be a blessed Christmas to others. Amen.