

Luke 2:1-20

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.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them..’

What Child is This? - December 24, 2019

Luke 2:1-20

Here we are once again. Gathered at night, the sanctuary beautiful, sitting with friends and family. Whether you come here regularly or just once a year, whether this is your first time at Collingswood or you've been part of us for many years, Greetings and Merry Christmas.

Today our routines are interrupted. Today there is no "same old, same old." Today we are doing things that we do at no other time of the year. It is my sincere hope that whatever is happening in your life that is interrupting whatever you consider to be normal is bringing you a sense of joy, a sense of fulfillment, a sense of peace.

Certainly a group of shepherds living outside the tiny village of Bethlehem 2000 years ago had their routines interrupted and at the end of it all, I have little doubt they did experience a sense of joy, a sense of fulfillment, a sense of peace.

Why are we here? Why were the shepherds there? All because of the birth of a baby. So what?

I mean, there's nothing wrong with the birth of babies, you and I are evidence of that! Nonetheless, aside from impacting our parents and perhaps a few of their friends and relatives, the birth of a baby is hardly an occasion to disrupt all our lives.

But for this particular baby, many parts of entire world choose to disrupt their routines. In some places, they gather as families. In some places they just party. In some places, like here, they choose to attend religious services. Thanks for coming!

But again I ask, so what? What is so special about this particular baby born so long ago in a small town to a couple so poor that they could only place their newborn son in a manger — a long open box that animals eat from! The sad but true fact is that every day, children are born all over the world, even in America, to poor people under difficult circumstances. None of us thinks two seconds about the 2 million or so children who enter the world every day who have no certainty about how or even whether they will grow up.

So what child is this? What child is this whose birth has interrupted our carefully ordered lives? What child is this whose birth set the world on a new trajectory and caused both wonderful and tragic events all over the world? What child is this whose message still has the power to inspire incredible acts of self-sacrifice yet also has the power to anger presidents?

Well as the song we sing every year says, "This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Again, so what?"

You know, I love this season. I love the gatherings of families. I love the gatherings with friends. I love the specialness that makes beauty happen even as the sun rises later and sets early every day.

But in all the fun and festivities, all the shopping and partying, all the reruns of holiday movies and playing of Christmas music on the radio, I fear that we have forgotten the real significance of the birth of this particular baby, who would have been known by his contemporaries as Yeshua ben Yosef, or Joshua, son of Joseph. No, Jesus was not the son of Joseph and Mary Christ!

Once upon a time, the birth of Jesus was seen in the larger context of the entire Christian message. In other words, to commit yourself to following Jesus meant not just celebrating his birth at Christmas and his resurrection at Easter, but committing yourself to understanding and embracing why these events happened and why they matter both for all humanity and for us as individuals. Otherwise, this wonderful time of the year merely degenerates into just another excuse to indulge ourselves with food and drink, overspend our budgets, and give out presents that will be forgotten ten minutes after they're unwrapped.

So, what child is this? And why is he so important? I would like to explore that with you tonight.

Christmas helps answer what I hope is the fundamental question every human being should have: why am I here and how should I live this life? Granted, many people don't bother thinking much about such things. Others, unfortunately, are too busy just surviving to even wonder why they're here on this earth.

But for you in this room, I hope you have spent some quality time, all by yourself, just trying to figure out the purpose and meaning of your personal life, all by yourself. Now I agree, it can be a scary journey, especially if you don't do it very often. When we start to question who we are and why we're here, well — let's just say "don't ask questions if you won't like the answers." In other words, when we start down the path of figuring out who we are, we will inevitably find that we will have to make changes and, let's face it, nobody likes to change, do we?

Do you believe in God? What a silly question! Of course you believe, why else would you be here tonight? But the real question is not whether you believe in God or not, but who is God to you? What is your God's relationship with you? How does your God ask you to live your life, and why? Let's be frank, all people, religious or not, have to deal with the God question at some point. Even so-called atheists and agnostics do. They simply choose to reject the idea of a living God who is part of the fabric of our existence as human beings collectively and individually. They set their own rules and they justify their decisions based on their own standards, wherever they come from.

But to believe in God, or a higher power, or a great spirit, or even The Force, means that you acknowledge that there is something in the universe that is beyond ourselves, beyond our limits to understand, beyond our limits to evaluate. We've all had those "awesome" moments, haven't we? We've looked up at the night sky, we've viewed incredible ocean vistas, we've been captivated by the cries of a newborn baby. All these things, and many more, point to a grandeur and vastness far greater than our poor minds can comprehend. It can lead to dangerous thoughts. It might even

lead us to speculate that instead of just looking around and contemplating the evidence of our eyes and ears, there might just be something out there actually causing all this.

Most people are ok with that “higher power” train of thought. “Yeah, there’s something out there, there’s a lot of stuff I don’t understand about how the world works, even how life works, but, you know, gotta make a living, gotta feed the kiddies, gotta have fun!” And we leave it at that. There’s God, there’s me, maybe there’s even you. That’s nice. And, frankly that’s where many people, religious or not, are: people who do not have the time, or interest, or motivation to explore further. In other words, “Me and God, hey, we’re cool.”

That indeed may be your attitude this evening, whether you come every week, or just once a year. “Hey the church does nice things, that’s great.” After all, if you’re pretty much satisfied with your life and the direction it’s going, keeping God and questions about God as far away from your life may be, for the moment, just fine.

But into everyone’s life creeps what Psychologists call “cognitive dissonance.” It’s the concept that because we humans seek and desire stability, we cannot hold two conflicting ideas in our minds at the same time. For example, you break up with someone and part of your mind tells you that it’s all their fault. Yet deep down, you know that a lot of it is your fault, too. When we’re in this conflicted state, we get angry, we get confused, we may even get drunk frequently and try to hurt ourselves just because we cannot accept two realities at once. Something has to change. Something has to make sense and until we achieve some clarity, we will continue to be at war with ourselves, with the very real possibility of self-destructive consequences. I think all of us know people traveling down this road, including ourselves.

How do we break this pattern and overcome the conflict? We change. We accept a new reality. We alter our way of looking at life and living.

I am a Christian. I choose to follow Jesus Christ. I follow Jesus — meaning I accept his teachings and his example of how I should try to live my life. For me, his way makes helps me make sense out of an otherwise senseless world. It doesn’t mean that I understand everything. It doesn’t mean I accept everything. I still have questions and doubts and fears. Nonetheless, the Christian pathway answers more questions than any other I have encountered. Therefore, I can be more at peace with myself and with the world.

The Christian path makes sense to me because it makes the most absurd statement of all. God, the higher power, the otherness, the Force, if you wish. God chose to enter God’s creation by becoming a human being, just like me. Yes, for me, it follows that if there is “something out there” that is responsible for creating my world, it also follows that this something also created me. And if this something went to the trouble of creating me, this something would also care about me personally — would know all about me and therefore this something would love me.

That something, which has the power to create the universe, create me, and continues to know and care about me, I call God. The key word here is love. For me, love is the conviction that at the core of our being we are embraced, accepted, and enjoyed by not only our creator but by ourselves personally, just because we exist on this earth. I am not alone. You are not alone. We are not alone. All because of God.

Apparently, I am not alone in such a belief. I know myself well enough that I know I cannot navigate the world based only on my intelligence, talents and abilities. In some things, I am very good, in others, OK, and in most, simply horrible. Without a guide, without a blueprint, without an overall picture of what life is and how I am supposed to interact with creation, with my fellow human beings, and even with myself, I know I am lost and I cannot hope to survive.

So, “What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us. Just a stranger on the bus. Tryin’ to make his way home?” Singer Joan Osborne asked that musical question. Well, if you wanted assurance that God was actually one of us, who would he be? Someone we could relate to, or not? Someone who cared if we lived or died, or not? Someone who could shake up traditional ways of thinking and acting, or not?

For me, Jesus Christ, from his birth, to his death, to his resurrection is someone I can relate to. He was born to poor parents in a barn and had to run away with his parents just to survive. Relatable. He unquestionably cared deeply about everyone he met, especially those who were different from him. Caring. He dared to say and do things that challenged and still challenge the establishment. World Shaker.

What more do you want? What more do you need? Now I will be the first to admit that we, His Church, the people who are supposed to best represent and live out Jesus’ teachings and way of life, often do a terrible job of presenting Jesus to the world. I know some of you, many of you, have been grievously hurt by institutional religion and its representatives. For that, I am profoundly sorry and I would appreciate the opportunity and privilege of talking with you and just listening to what you have to say.

Yet here we are, together in this room, on this night. This night where the awesome glory of God breaks into the world as a helpless, poor baby born in a wretched town on the edge of civilization. And the ones who witness God’s first night on earth are a group of poor despised shepherds — men who were mistrusted and ridiculed by their own society. How crazy! How impossible!

Or, how incredible, how amazing, how ultimately loving that the Creator of the Universe would deliberately choose to be a slob like one of us, be that stranger on the bus, trying to make his way home and utterly desire to take us with him? Does any of this make sense? Does any of this matter? Does any of this affect your life? If so, Jesus Christ, born this day, has one response. “Follow Me.” Merry Christmas!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.