

Christmas Eve 2018

Luke 2:1-20

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

We've had a number of misadventures here at Holy Trinity on Christmas Eve and Day.

Before Ken Olsen made this lovely stand for Baby Jesus He'd taken more than one header in front of the altar; one year the little lamb was swiped from the creche scene on the front lawn; we had exploding cranberries at an 11 p.m. service when the candles in the hurricane globes burned down too far; we no longer have real vigil lights in the window wells after someone's fur hood started to smolder; worshipers have fainted and altar servers and choir members have gotten sick and left holes in our worship line-up. But thankfully (not to tempt fate!) the organ has never died. An *a capella* Christmas just wouldn't seem right. 200 years ago a church by the name of St. Niklaus, outside of Salzburg, Austria, **did** experience organ failure. (In some versions of the story, church mice get the blame for nibbling through the organ cables. Very unfair – how **could** they have done that, since we know on Christmas Eve “no one is stirring, not even a mouse”?) **But** the death of that Austrian organ did **not** kill worship.

The organ actually went on the fritz a couple weeks before Christmas. But never fear: Joseph Mohr, the young priest who served at St. Niklaus Church, was a gifted poet and had previously written a piece that began “Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht...” “Silent night, holy night...” He gave it to a friend, Franz Gruber, a schoolteacher and also organist at St. Niklaus, and asked him to set the words to music. On Christmas Eve exactly 200 years ago, December 24, 1818, Joseph Mohr sang “Silent Night” in a small country church while Franz Gruber accompanied him on the guitar.

That airing of “Silent Night” might have been a “one and done” event, except that the traveling repairman who fixed St. Niklaus' organ heard the song, learned it, and spread it around in his travels. We can also thank a 19th century version of the family Von Trapp that attracted

business for their father's chamois-skin glove booth in town markets by singing. The Strassers had quite a following and performed "Silent Night" for the king of Prussia. He loved it and asked the Cathedral Choir to sing it, after which it took off like lightning across Europe, crossing over to the US by the 1850's.

I think all of us can wing singing the 1st verse of *Silent Night* from memory. 2nd verse: maybe, maybe not, so here you go:

*Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight
Glories stream from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ the Savior is born
Christ the Savior is born*

'Love those shepherds! They're some of my favorite characters in the whole story. They're fun and interesting because their role is so **random!** There's no rational reason God should have sent the angels to serenade **shepherds** about the Lord's birth. Shepherds were nobodies. They were dirty and smelled like sheep and lived out of doors and were considered spiritually "less than" because their life style was incompatible with keeping the Jewish law: not just the **finer** points of the law but even **basics** like washing their hands before eating. Who's gonna believe **them** when they claim angels confided in them the news of the Messiah's birth?? (Sorta like – why did the risen Lord appear first to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning?? She was a **woman**, for heaven's sake. She couldn't even serve as a witness in a court of law. Why send **her** to share the news of the resurrection?) Indeed: **Why?? Why not** entrust the news of the birth (and the news of the resurrection) to people with some **credibility?**

Because that's **our** way, not God's. Because that's **worldly**, not **heavenly** logic. Here's Ann Weems talking about that in a poem called *Kneeling in Bethlehem*:

*Into the stable they straggled, poor and dirty,
 hardly suitably dressed for polite society.
 Had we been Joseph
 we would have feared robbery.
 Had we been Mary
 we would have feared germs around our newborn.
 Had we been God
 these are not ones we would have chosen
 to first come and see the Child.
 After all, they showed a certain carelessness
 about the rules of church.
 And yet, God-chosen, they [the shepherds...] came
 to kneel and worship him
 whom we would later call the Good Shepherd.
 Perhaps we could brush up on our humbleness.*

Humbleness. Humility – most of us don't major in it. But God consistently chooses the humble ones, the little ones, the inconsequential ones, the uneducated and maybe the uncouth ones, much of the time. The Baby in the manger is a perfect example of God as Jack-in-the-Box, popping up when and where least expected. Like in "Bethlehem, least of the clans of Judah...." (Micah 5:2) Then in Nazareth, a Galilean backwater, causing Nathaniel to ask, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) (We know the tone of voice, incredulous, almost pitying, the one used by out-of-staters who say, "You're from **New Jersey**?") Surprise! God as a human newborn, laid on a prickly blanket of hay in an animal feed box. Surprise! God as a human man nailed to a splintered cross of wood on a bloody hill of execution overlooking a steaming garbage dump.

The most exquisite example of humility isn't the shepherds or the Virgin Mother or the foster father Joseph; it's the Babe himself:

*who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness. (Philippians 2:6-7, NRSV)*

He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! ... It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

(Philippians 2:6-8, *The Message*)

And so it is that we humbly acknowledge Christmas has always been riding on God, not us. It's not about whether we finally fulfilled our New Year's resolution to shop over the summer, to send Christmas greetings in August, to get our act together and not be a wreck in the final weeks and days leading up to Christmas. It's not about whether we baked cookies, got the tree up early, and are ready to go home tonight to relax, go to bed and let "visions of sugarplums dance in our heads" instead of pulling an all-nighter. Christmas is up to God, not us. And God has done everything necessary: God has sent the Son. That was out of our hands, out of our power. It is only in our power to receive Him, to receive from his fullness, "*grace upon grace.*" (John 1:16)

In closing: a final word from Ann Weems:

*Into this silent night
As we make our weary way
we know not where,
just when the night becomes its darkest
and we cannot see our path,
just then
is when the angels rush in,
their hands full of stars.*

Love this Christmas to you. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham