

12-24-21

Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

Communion

While They Were There

Deanna and I moved to Elizabethtown, Kentucky shortly after we got married in 1974. We had both accepted teaching jobs there. She as music teacher for the Catholics at St. James' Elementary School; I as English teacher at Elizabethtown High school. We thought we'd live there forever. We did all the things that teachers did in those days. We took our turns at the concession stands at ball games; we sponsored extra-curricular events; we graded papers and prepared lesson plans. In our limited understanding of how the world worked, we thought we'd teach there our thirty years and probably be buried in the cemetery around the corner from the high school. But while we were there, things happened that we hadn't planned on. We were actively involved in our church even way back then. I taught high school boys at church like I did at school. Deanna worked with children's music, and we both sang in the choir. And God began to stir in us, in me mostly, I guess, causing me to think there might be something for me to do in the Church as a career. We talked about it some. I even visited with our pastor about it, but we were pretty wrapped up in what we were doing, so it got pushed aside as things like that sometimes can. We went ahead and finished the next degree that the state of Kentucky required us to have to continue to teach. In a few years, Blake came to us and the idea of quitting a job, even a teaching job, and going back to school didn't seem feasible. But while we were there, those seeds got planted, and we had no idea how they might grow.

Obviously, we didn't stay in Kentucky, although it will always be home. We moved more times than most people do and every place we've been had some of those while-we-were-there experiences. I refer to the five years we spent living in Indiana as our time in exile. Sorry to some of you, but the North begins at the Ohio River and Indiana is on the wrong side of it. But even while we were there, God continued to stir and convinced me mostly that there might be something to this call to ministry I thought I had put up. Deanna thought I had put it up, too. Kyle was on the way by that time, and, long story short, I figured out how to respond to a call the Presbyterian way, and became a candidate for ministry.

We moved from there to rural West Tennessee, where Carol Rawlings had family. That part of the country is about as far from the North in most ways as it could be. I became the student pastor at the Yorkville Cumberland Presbyterian Church which is halfway between Nowhere and Nowhere Else (or between Dyer and Dyersburg for any who know that area), with no idea what I was doing. But those folks, including Carol's aunt and her family, were patient and supportive. And while we were there, I began to learn how to be a pastor. Some of that I learned at Memphis Seminary, a place I will always hold dear, but most of it I learned by preaching and teaching and serving alongside those folks who had been going to church there for generations. Not all of those lessons were easy to learn. I know it will come as a shock to some of you, but church people can be just as mean as people anywhere else, and some of the people in Yorkville had had generations to choose up sides and disagree. While we were there, I began to think I just might be able to do this thing that I believed God was calling me to do.

There have been more moves. Including the one that brought us here several years ago. And each of those places had its own while-we-were-there kind of experience. Some of them we might have missed if we hadn't been paying attention.

In Florida, I learned that I wasn't the only one there who didn't play golf, but there weren't many of my kind. On our second journey to Tennessee, I found out pretty quickly that it wasn't a good idea to let them know we are both Alabama and Kentucky sports fans. Even in a cosmopolitan place like Nashville with people from everywhere, that was pretty hard to overcome.

Our Church here, like most Churches, I guess, is a pretty interesting mix of people. Some of you live in families who have been in this church for generations. One of the first Sundays I was here, Emily Austin introduced herself to me and told me that her mother had brought her to that pew right over there when she was a baby, and that she had been worshiping there ever since. We miss her these days, but she is still an important part of who we are. There are several multi-generational families among us. You know who you are and how important the Church is to all those generations. But there are others who got here in other ways, people who came to us without much understanding of who Presbyterians are and how we do things. I've told some of you before about the young couple in our Church in Huntsville who were planning to be married several years ago. Her family had been Presbyterian as long as the Decoux' have or longer. His family belonged to some Spirit-filled, Pentecostal Church with world headquarters in Oneota, AL (if that tells you something about them). His mother came to worship with us one day when we were giving a shower for the kids. She talked with me after Church and said she wasn't sure at first when Michael said he was marrying a Presbyterian. She wasn't sure what that meant, but she said she felt better about us when she came to worship and discovered that we read the same Bible they read in her Church. I didn't ask her how many she thought there were, and we didn't talk about how differently we read some portions of that book. Some of you may have had ideas like that when you found you way here. You had probably been told some things about us; you might have even read about us in the media back in the days when we were in the news more. Now that most of that has

settled down and we're just trying to go about the faithful business of proclaiming the Gospel and taking care of people, we don't make the paper or the news quite as often anymore, even when General Assembly is meeting. But, hopefully, while you've been here, you found something different than you might have expected. Some of you found friendships, maybe with people who might never have built a relationship with if you hadn't served on a committee (this is a Presbyterian Church, after all) or been in a Sunday School group or served a meal or done some other service for someone you didn't know. Some of you found ways to study and understand Scripture that you hadn't experienced before. Some of you found worship that was more inspiring than condemning, more affirming of who you were trying to be than accusative of what you weren't. Whoever you were when you came here, while you were here, you found ways to hear who God was calling you to be, and took steps to work toward new goals. Maybe you even learned that people who don't share your politics or people who don't run in your social circles still have things to offer that you not only need but want in your life, and you forged relationships across all kinds of barriers that would prevent them in less tolerant places. All that's going on in your life may not happen all at once, but some of it can happen while you're here, if you pay attention to what God is saying and doing while you are.

Mary and Joseph had been through a lot the past several months. Right after that Angel showed up with the strangest talk any of them had ever heard, Joseph thought about giving it all up, setting Mary aside, and going to find another way to build a life. But Joseph got a visit from the Angel too, and, somehow, he decided to honor his commitment. He did love Mary. But it was hard to know she was carrying a child that wasn't his. Mary had her own struggles. It helped some to spend that time with her cousin Elizabeth, who was having struggles of a different sort. But when she returned to Nazareth, any of us who live in small towns know that it didn't take long for the talk to start. Then there

were the Romans to deal with. They were always demanding something. Taxes mostly. But they imposed in other ways. And now this order came that everybody had to go to wherever their family was from to pay another tax. Mary and Joseph knew that Mary's delivery date was near. There was no ultrasound, but Mary knew. But the Romans didn't care about such things. Everybody had to go. The Emperor said so. And Middle Eastern men still today don't travel far without their wives, so Mary had to go with Joseph, like all the other women who had to pack up for a journey and like all the women who would follow their husbands to Nazareth. It was an unpleasant time, but they had no choice. They joined a caravan of other headed to Bethlehem where Joseph's people came from and set out.

You know the story. When they got there, the city was full. Not only was there no room at the Hilton. Even the EconoLodge and the local Magnolia Inn were full up. There literally was no room for more travelers. The Romans hadn't issued vouchers or reserved a block of rooms for sixth generation Bethlemites. Joseph did the best he could to provide for them; he finally convinced the Innkeeper to let them stay in the stable out back. And while they were there, she went into labor and delivered her child. No doctor. No midwife. No epidural. No mother to offer comfort. Just Joseph, the donkey she had ridden in on and the other animals with whom they shared that stable. She had hoped to have her child at home, like most people did. But while they were there, in this strange place that couldn't even offer them a room, the time came, and she delivered her child, the Child who grew to become our Savior.

You know the rest of this night's story. As if the birth of that baby wasn't enough, while they were there, they had visitors. Shepherds. Not the people who usually show up when a baby's born. And they went out and told everybody. Eventually there were others, those strange guys who came from the East. At least they brought gifts. The gold might help them get home a bit

more comfortably. What they were supposed to do with frankincense and that foul-smelling myrrh, no one was quite sure. But it was something. And eventually, Mary and Joseph and the child went home.

We'll begin to tell the story about what happens next in the New Year, but it was while they were in this place that God did what no one was expecting. God came among us in that Child, and changed the world and us forever.

Some of you are out of your natural habitat because it's the holidays. Others of you have been invaded by family and friends who have come to spend these days with you. These may be joyous times. They may be times that include some sad remembering. If you're spending time with family, there may be some tension. If there are unexpected announcements during these gatherings, you may not be sure exactly how you feel. We are grateful that you have carved out time in the midst of all that to worship. While you're here, don't worry about what you left in the freezer that's supposed to be on the table in a few minutes. There is probably enough. Don't worry about that spot that never comes out of the tablecloth. Those who sit around that table probably don't care nearly as much about that spot as you do, and if they do, they'll soon find something more substantial to worry about. While you're here, let the grace and the wonder of this night wash over you. For unto us this Child has been born. Unto us a Savior has been given. There in that stable, the Glory of God has come among us, and it's not going anywhere.

Merry Christmas, friend, brothers and sisters. While you're here, let the wonder of this night fill you with joy, joy that will sustain us forever. Amen.

Prayers of the People for Christmas Eve

Gracious and Holy God, on this night we have heard how the world into which you sent Jesus was ruled by powerful people:

Emperors, Kings, Governors, people who thought their position was all about authority. Yet, we gather here in this place convinced that the only real authority belongs to you, that you are Sovereign, Almighty, and Everlasting. We thank you that, in the end, justice and righteousness are in your hands and that you freely offer them to us and to all. We praise you for the peace this night promises, and we pray for the strength and courage to carry it from this place with us when we go. Most of all on this night we thank you for your Son, Jesus, the Light of the World, who not only came among us full of grace and truth, but lives among us still and calls for those same responses from us.

Hear our prayers this night, prayers that all people everywhere might find healing, comfort, and joy in this Child and in his Way.

We pray for those who govern us today, that they might find wisdom and a will for the good of all, and that might strive for the courage to work for peace instead of power, for justice instead of recognition.

We pray for all who must work this night. For caregivers and caretakers, for people who provide care in hospitals and nursing homes and other places where people need them. For those who patrol and protect us, for those who serve our country and other countries and work for peace who cannot be at home for Christmas. For those who provide hospitality in hotels and restaurants and shelters.

We pray for all who suffer this night. For those who are sick, for those recovering and those who will not. While our weather is temperate, some live in place where they're cold. Some are lonely. Some are grieving. Some are hungry while our tables are full. Some struggle with issues of their own making and some struggle with burdens placed upon them by others. Send comfort and even joy to all this night.

We pray for families and friends who are not together this Christmas, for some who are traveling and for some who wish they could. We pray especially for those who need your guidance in these days, and we pray with thanks for all those who live in our memories but live forever with you.

Conform our prayers, Loving God, to your will and use us to do your will in this season and always we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.