

Luke 8: 15-20 Christmas Eve meditation 7 pm 12/24/2021 Rev. Janet Chapman

We are in the season of well wishing, blessings, and cheerful Merry Christmases which are much needed in the turmoil and uncertainty of a long-suffering pandemic. Many of us thought things would be different this year and have struggled to keep our spirits up when it didn't turn out that way. However, unlike last year, some of us are here in person giving a small glimpse into a new reality to come, being able to safely gather, respecting the health of one another while being able to see each other with knowing and compassionate looks. This is the year when we understand the power of fear and have discovered small and big ways to triumph over it. This is the year we found ways to recognize in the most ordinary places of life, God's extraordinary saving activity. Thanks to technology, we have witnessed, across our globe, ways that God is working to lift us out of ordinary despair and into miraculous events along our journey.

On this night, we remember that the most incredible event in history occurred in the midst of tax season, an common occurrence even 2000 years ago. In the backwater municipality of Bethlehem, 1400 miles from the capital of Rome, government bureaucrats conducted a census to increase the tax revenues of Caesar Augustus, whose name literally meant "the exalted." Even more ordinary, the gospel author Luke suggests that it was a pagan government's bureaucratic decree in which God uses to initiate a sequence of events that redeemed humanity and the whole cosmos. It was not God willed or desired God's people to be taxed, to have to travel to far away places using their own resources to get there and be counted in a oppressive census which only made life harder for the very poor. God did not wish that on the common laborers who had so very little. But God used this "exalted"

earthly emperor's tax census as the occasion for the birth of the Lord of lords and Prince of Peace. If God can use a census, taxes, and government oppression to initiate the extraordinary, then we are reminded this Christmas 2021 that God can most certainly use a pandemic to work miracles. In all the negativity of our world, we often overlook this reality so on this holiest of nights, I ask you, where has God worked a miracle in your life? Don't worry if you can't think of one right off the bat – that doesn't mean it didn't happen, it just means you haven't recognized it yet for what it is. It took decades for the majority of Bethlehem and surrounding Judea to recognize the miracle that happened that one particular night. To them, it was no holier than anything other night. There was too much to do at the time; folks were busy cleaning and preparing for guests, greeting relatives, trying to feed and house everybody, and scrambling to figure out how they would pay the bills – sound familiar?

When the decree came down from Caesar, Joseph and Mary complied even though Mary was far along in her pregnancy. They traveled 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem because that was where Joseph was from, and please note, there is no mention of Mary riding on a donkey. Being poor, it is a strong possibility that a very pregnant Mary had to hike those 90 miles right alongside of Joseph without the benefit of a ride. If that didn't induce labor, I don't know what would. Tradition has added the legend of the donkey to help us feel better about the story. Secondly, they arrive and Joseph is literally turned down by many of his own relatives, extended family, for simple shelter. The cruelty is unimaginable as we see depicted heartless boarders in guest rooms who will not accommodate a pregnant teenager experiencing birth contractions. One can't help but wonder if harsh judgment is at work here – You know, like "I don't care how he is related to me - how dare Joseph show up with a very

pregnant fiancé and expect a welcome,” something like that? So Mary & Joseph end up in an unnamed place that has a feeding trough in it – could have been a stable, could have been a cave, could have been a lean-to which breaks the wind for the animals; scripture doesn’t say. Again we prefer the more amicable choice of a walled-in stable that offered warmth, even if just from the nearby animals, which also aren’t mentioned in scripture. Then a few months later, the young family escapes to pagan Egypt as displaced refugees when the government announced its plan of homicide of all boys 2 years and younger. In this whole narrative, it is hard to see any miracles, any divine intervention going on without the lens of history through which to view the circumstances.

A careful reading, however, reveals to us that angels, or spiritual beings, are constantly at work behind the scenes, watching over the young family and guiding them in their journey. From the moment that an angel appears to Mary announcing her pregnancy to an angel speaking in Joseph’s dreams to angels proclaiming to shepherds about the much-awaited birth of the Messiah, angels make themselves known in unexpected times and places. Such divine beings are reflected in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity & Islam where angels are described as being assigned to persons throughout history. We aren’t sure what to make of such references, but there are folks who swear they must have a guardian angel... while others joke their guardian angel must have taken some time off. One of the most interesting tales of guardian angels occurs in the apocryphal Book of Tobit, written approximate 200 years before the time of Jesus. The Book of Tobit relates the story of a pious Jew named Tobit who sends his son Tobias on a journey to recover a small fortune that was owed to him. In the course of his journey, the angel Raphael joins Tobias, disguised as

one of Tobit's relatives, and in the course of the journey assists Tobias in finding a wife, saving him from death at the hands of a demon, and provides an elixir to restore his father's sight. The folk tale serves to remind us that God always provides for our deepest needs, that every place is a "thin place" as the Celts talk of, where God's vision is revealed through angelic companions or the events of our lives.

There is a reason the legendary film "It's A Wonderful Life" has become a timeless Christmas tale shown on TV every year, just like The Ten Commandments or Sound of Music. Clarence, an angel in search of his wings, appears the moment George Bailey, the town banker, attempts suicide. Clarence reminds Bailey that, despite his apparent business failure, his life has touched countless people, directly or indirectly, for the good. It prompts us all to acknowledge where our lives have improved the lives of those around us, even when we didn't recognize it. Miracles are happening even in the most ordinary dimensions of life still today, even if we don't see it, even if we haven't realized it yet.

The British poet U.A. Fanthorpe was the first woman nominated as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University. Her poem "BC:AD" captures the unremarkable circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus: "This was the moment when Before Turned into After, and the future's uninvented timekeepers presented arms. This was the moment when nothing happened. Only dull peace sprawled boringly over the earth. This was the moment when even energetic Romans could find nothing better to do than counting heads in remote provinces. And this was the moment when a few farm workers and three members of an obscure Persian sect walked haphazard by starlight straight into the kingdom of heaven." Where has God worked a miracle in your life? If you aren't sure, don't stress; just know God promises it's there in the midst of the most ordinary events of your life; divine beings hard at work making a way for you to stumble straight into the kingdom of heaven. Thanks be to God.