

Christmas Eve. December 24, 2016.

All through Advent, we have been waiting for God to come and save us. And at the end of this particular year, in which the world has shown so much ugliness, hatred, and hopelessness, perhaps we have longed for this salvation a bit more intensely than usual. This year, in our world, our nation, our metropolitan area, and in some of our families has emphasized for us that we desperately need for God to come and save us. And tonight, up against the despair, anger, and helplessness of so much of the world, we make the bold claim that God has come to us and is saving us. That God has come in Jesus Christ and is still coming. That our salvation has been assured and is being worked out on grand and intimate scales.

Tonight with the world seeming to explode or implode, certainly to plode, whichever prefix we give it, we have the audacity to celebrate God's great saving work. We celebrate that however bad the world may seem to get, it will forever be the world that God has come to, the world Christ walked, the world into which God was born. This broken, messy thing is the world that God is saving.

But in our celebrations, it might do us good to remember how God has come into the world. Because in our desperation we may be prone to imagine God coming in with guns blazing, God wiping away wicked rulers and setting us up in their stead, God making like a more effectual Dustin Hoffman at the end of *The Graduate*, bludgeoning enemies with a cross. But if Christmas tells us anything about the nature of God, then we must give up these fever dreams of power and revenge. Because according to the Christmas story, the way God saves is very surprising and much more difficult.

The beginning of Luke's Christmas story is a setup. He begins with emperors and governors, with big events that shape the world, things that the world would remember whether Christ came or not. He begins with the big picture context that is where we expect to see God at work. And then he shifts, radically, to a poor carpenter and his teen mom of a wife, huddling in a room reserved for animals. The angels are another stage in the setup. If God is coming into the world, we aren't in the least surprised that the event is accompanied by a heavenly choir, but we should wonder how on earth they ended up in the middle of nowhere, singing to nobodies. We've heard this story enough that we forget to be surprised at just how strange it is. The announcement of God's coming is first given to shepherds on the night shift, folks who were generally seen as being suspect and at best the bottom rung of society's ladder.

When God comes into the world, it is not in the ways that we would expect. God first comes to the poor, the neglected, the negligible. And God works not through great muscles and mighty weapons, but through extreme vulnerability—the vulnerability of an infant. Good news to the poor, delivered through a child that cannot yet even hold his head up. In every imaginable way, God saves the world from the bottom up. If we left our attention on the emperor Caesar Augustus and the governor Quirinius, we just might miss Christmas altogether.

So here's the thing. First, merry Christmas and warm fuzzies. I mean that, really. This night of peace and love is a great gift that our faith and culture combine to give us. But also, in these dark days, we should remember to look for God where God is most likely to be. If we remain captive to our fascination with the vulgar brutality of the leaders of the world (the emperors and governors and presidents of the ancient world and

of today), we just may miss the birth of God's saving hope among the lowly. If we want to be a part of God's saving work, we must be in relationship with those who will hear the good news first, the shepherds and teen moms and day laborers of the world. And when they tell us the good news, we must remember that what will save the world is not an army, but a community forged around a cradle.

Christmas calls us out of our fantasies of violent redemption and into a difficult assurance that God will come even among us, and even among those less powerful than us. God comes in gentleness and vulnerability because the deep logic of reality is that only love can bring peace. Christ comes among us, bringing joy and peace and hope and love. Come, let us adore him!