



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FEAST OF THE INCARNATION, CHRISTMAS, DECEMBER 24, 2018
ISAIAH 62: 6-12; PSALM 97; TITUS 3:4-7; LUKE 2:1-20

POETRY IN A PROSE-FILLED WORLD

Luke 2:1-20 [And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria). And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.]

Earlier this year my wife and I spent several weeks on the Greek island of Patmos in the south Aegean Sea as part of my sabbatical leave. We rented a century old farm house built into the side of the hill overlooking the

village below and the serene bay beyond it. From our perch we gained a sense of the rhythms of Mediterranean agrarian life that stretches back centuries.

From our terrace we sat and watched and listened for hours on, with farmyard sloping downward and around—a small vegetable garden, fig and lemon and olive trees, and about a hundred grape vines replanted by new Scandinavian owners who have oenological dreams. Two goats, a mother and kid, were just down from the vineyard—remnant of a larger herd long since gone—goat cheese is the purpose now. And to the right was a pasture where a neighbor kept his two horses still, and further up the hill, near the ancient ruins of the Roman acropolis, the bleats of another neighbor's sheep herd wafted down on the wind to us as we sat on the terrace taking in the view.

It may all seem rather bucolic and alluring, right?

Well, the farmhouse is actually two houses—an upper main house, and the lower farmhouse. One on top of the other, both built into the side of the hill. Our budget provided for the lower farmhouse, a simple but livable two room abode with small kitchen.

After arriving we learned the farmhouse had previously served as the stable for farm animals.¹

It had been rebuilt for human comfort in the last decade, reusing the stones that were there before, and except for insects and a farm cat who kept the lizards and snakes at a safe perimeter for us, we did not share our humble abode with any animals.



Greek Farmhouse on Patmos

But as I lied in bed at night, I was keenly aware that their spirit was still there. I was oddly grateful to know it had served as safe haven for them through the centuries. And I got a better sense of the sort of stable to which Mary and Joseph were directed on that night in Bethlehem long ago.

There were no inns in their day, if we understand that to mean nice boutique hotels scattered across the ancient Judean hillsides. It was culturally expected in Jesus' day, that if a stranger knocked on your door, you welcomed them in, fed them, and even offered them lodging.

We are told the house—the upper house—is full, so they were directed below, to where the animals were kept. The barn, but not a freestanding one; excavations across the

ancient Near East demonstrate the two levels were commonplace, with animals below, kept there for safety in sounding alarm and also for heat. Never mind the smell...

My friends, this is a scandalous story with

more political intrigue than meets the eye at first glance. We have tamed it through the years to be a sweet story of haloed characters, with cattle lowing and sheep looking on adoringly at the newborn child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. It was a feeding trough, and this young woman, pregnant before marriage and the man to whom she was betrothed were not welcome in the upper house.

¹ The main house is bright white; the farmhouse is raw stone with the gardens downhill and the pastures above it.

And the shepherds were outcast, too—the lowest rung of the social ladder—they owned no land and roamed the hillsides for pasture and slept among their sheep and goats. The richer ones would sleep in tents or caves while others tended the flocks by night. (I am trying to paint a picture that hints at the odors you might imagine.) These are the ones to whom the angels of God bring good news—do you see the scandal of it all? These are the ones who pay a visit to Jesus and his parents, and all of them have been relegated to the borderlands of life.

And make no mistake, this is a political commentary on the ways those in power treated those on the margins, and we miss the point if we sterilize it of that critique.

Any serious investigation of scriptures will quickly arrive at the conclusion that our God is politically active, always has been, and invites us to be also. The prophetic voice speaks poetic truth to a prose-filled world, which too often is so immersed in ideological navel-gazing that it cannot see the wounded lying about. Ideology is focused on holding fast to one's convictions even when there is sufficient data to refute them. And it should be said that we all have ideologies.²

Every church I've ever served, including this one, has had someone who tells me leave politics out of the pulpit, by which I think they really mean, don't talk to us about the wounds of the world. It's too much.



Refugees arrive at Annunciation House

I do not think God's politics are partisan, conservative or progressive, democrat or republican—rather, God's politics are guided by the divine attributes of mercy, hope and steadfast love (chesed). And ours should be as well.

Ten days ago I was on the U.S.-Mexican border at El Paso, Texas, and its sister city Juarez where Episcopalians on both sides are serving essentially as first responders to those caught up in a very real and tragic humanitarian crisis. Thousands are fleeing

violence in their villages across Central America in hopes of a better life in this country, and they are seeking asylum. One real look in their eyes and you will see the wounds they bear.

When they learned our government recently declared anyone who enters the country illegally

would be ineligible for asylum—ever—they began walking onto the bridges and surrendering to US Customs and Border Patrol officials. Languishing in detention centers here, essentially imprisoned, would be better than returning to the violence they had fled.³

As more surrendered to our border guards, the detention centers overflowed, so we are now refusing them. Desperate, the refugees began sleeping on the bridges, prompting a health crisis, which forced the mayor of Juarez to open shelters across his city where they will be held indefinitely. These shelters

² This exegetical theme juxtaposing ideological politics to prophetic politics speaking poetically in God's name is from Walter Brueggemann. <https://vimeo.com/55755360>

³ Annunciation house receives some 2000 refugees each week that the CBP cannot care for. This group of 50, mostly women and children, arrived as our group was finishing our time there. They were scared and weary and hadn't eaten that day.

are unsafe, prone to violence by drug cartels and their gangs that run rampant in the city. Our government has created a numbering system by which those applying for asylum and waiting in shelters would be processed, a few each day. For some it will be more than a year before their number comes up.

Here's the most horrifying piece of it all: They are writing the numbers on their forearms with permanent magic markers. 264391. Branded as outcast. There is no room for you in the inn.

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in their story tonight.

But here is the pivot. That prophetic voice which names the wounds also always gives rise to new possibilities—that God is not finished, never finished, and the story of Christmas stretches beyond the wounds of what is, and invites us to consider what may still be, guided by the divine math of mercy, hope and chesed. God's gestational investment in us, which we call the Incarnation, will not compute by using an ideological calculus; it cannot be defined by an algebra of us versus them, insiders and outsiders, the powerful and the oppressed.

Jesus enters the story in a stable in Bethlehem, as little child and as divine presence, and comes to us as Christ, as the Word of God, speaking poetic truth to all who will listen, that we can do this another way, because this prose-filled world is hurting, my friends, and as followers of Christ, you and I have something to say and do about that.

We've been entrusted with this Christmas story to serve as our story here and now, not just to warm our hearts by the embers of its obstetrical joy, but so it can serve as poetic inspiration to embrace the new possibilities into which God is calling us today.

This Cathedral stands for this purpose, and, by God's grace, we will give voice to God's politics forged in a community that yearns to live headlong into a poetic new world defined by mercy, hope, and chesed for all. For all.

So when we greet one another and the world with "Merry Christmas," let's not leave it as a simple pleasantry in passing; rather, let it stand as prophetic and poetic truth for the world as we work for mercy, hope and love in God's name.

Merry Christmas!



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL