

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • DECEMBER 24, 2020
CHRISTMAS EVE
“NOT SO FAR”



The Scripture
Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her

heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The Message
Not So Far: Christ
Mark Briley

It's Christmas Eve, 2020. I truly cannot believe it. What a year it has been, right? {*Insert your sigh or grunt or humble acknowledgment here.*} It is true... much pain this year. We've lost loved ones to a dreaded and uninvited virus. We couldn't be with them in their final months and, in many instances, we couldn't even gather to celebrate their lives once they were released to the heavens. We've missed graduations and family reunions and postponed weddings or masked up to see it happen from measured distances. Worship was *off* and then *virtual* and then *on* and then *virtual* again. Politics were as loud as ever, and even a virus that cares nothing of one's political stripes became political. Tough, tough, year.

But then?... the babies. Did you see them as their families read the most-famous story about a baby in human history? Wasn't that amazing? History will call them COVID babies... but we'll call them beloved. We'll call them gifts. We'll call them joy, and they will herald something new in the world in the coming years, and we'll cheer them on the whole way. While so much of the year has seemingly pushed us away from so much of life as we know it, a baby draws us back... close... hopeful... not so far from God. That is the gift of this night. Beyond the fanfare and the hype and the tradition of our Christmas season practices... the gift of God come close is what tonight is all about.

I admit – I love the fanfare, too. The lights, the songs, the Christmas Bundt cake that I will eat at midnight tonight and again for breakfast in the morning. Love it! And when it comes to babies in any and every season, our culture goes big with the fanfare. Jenna Karvunidis is generally credited with the launching of Gender Reveal Parties. Maybe you've been to one of these or held one for your own child-to-be.

Jenna didn't intend to start a movement. Getting the cake baker to secretly embed colored icing on the inside of the cake in 2008, Jenna and her husband would cut the cake to discover pink icing inside which was to tip the big surprise reveal that their baby would be a girl. Jenna posted about it on her blog, and the idea went viral. But classic human tendency to one-up the last one has led to some major fanfare surrounding Gender Reveal Parties; some which have gone way off the rails. At one Gender Reveal Party a few months ago, the family paid for a plane to crop dust a field with 350-gallons of pink water to honor their unborn child. The plane stalled out and crashed after dumping its shower of pink. In 2017, a father-to-be started a 47,000-acre wildfire that caused 8.2-million-dollars in damage when he shot his hunting rifle at an explosive target full of blue powder. No one was killed in either of these events,

fortunately, but there was at least one fatality from such an explosive at a Gender Reveal Party last year.¹ Jenna wrote this summer that she wishes she hadn't inspired this trend even though she notes it may have happened anyway.

Beyond the physical danger and damage it has caused, she notes that it has set a whole new focus on binary-gender stereotypes that have proven not to play out true to form in her own daughter's life, now 12-years-old, for whom the trend originated. *"I was certainly not anticipating creating an entire identity for my child,"* she wrote. *"I was just looking for a way to up the ante and get everyone excited and involved. And I have a flair for theatrics and love to throw parties – we had a party for the goldfish once. We have a blowout for the dog every year. I just kind of invented an occasion out of it."*²



Social Media could be blamed for this craze, of course, as we blame Social Media for pretty much everything these days (*sometimes fairly, other times unfairly... perhaps a message for another day*).

The truth is, as a culture, we do seem to over-script and over-celebrate most things in life to impress complete strangers. Can you imagine your great-grandparents taking pictures of their dinner? Can you see them going to worship where a fog machine blasts a big puff of theatrical steam before the pastor comes out to preach? Great-grandpa would have thought the church was on fire and likely jumped to tackle the pastor in attempts to stop, drop, and roll the pastor who was clearly on fire.

But... this night... marking the most important reveal in history... comes down to some young, inexperienced, and society-shunned parents, having a baby in a non-sterile environment without an epidural or a birthing playlist of their favorite songs. Is that what you've tuned in to hear about tonight? I don't know. It's strange, isn't it? Has Christmas become so scripted and overzealous in our celebrations that we miss the real deal?

While the reveal of the coming Christ-child wasn't without fanfare – God springing for an angelic appearance to young Mary and later a heavenly choir serenading some sheep herders asleep on the hillside – it wasn't a media crazed event. God could have held a LeBron James style going-to-south beach announcement saying at a pay-per-view press conference, *"I'm taking my talents to Bethlehem."* But no. The reveal was in the quiet places – Mary's tiny home. Joseph's humble abode. Shepherds break room.

¹ The Gender Reveal angle inspired by Bob Kaylor's work, "The Savior Reveal," as shared in the November/December issue of Homiletics Online for which Kaylor is Senior Writer. His primary source was Julie Beck's "How Many People Have to Die Before We're Done with Gender Reveals?" *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/11/gender-reveal-disasters/601801/>.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/jun/29/jenna-karvunidis-i-started-gender-reveal-party-trend-regret>

Inn Keeper's Motel 6 – “*We'll keep the light on for you,*” the innkeeper says as Joe replies, “*Not to worry, we're bringing our own Light, thanks.*” A silent night, a quiet place, God's greatest love is revealed.

Dr. Luke, our Gospel writer read by our Broadway families tonight, was clear to say the arrival of Jesus was not a media event. He sets up the contrast between Jesus and Caesar... Caesar who is mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 2. Caesar Augustus didn't do anything without making it a media event. He wasn't tweeting from the Royal Outhouse in the middle of the night, of course. Media in those days involved heralds and coinage. Augustus had coins minted announcing that he himself, was a “*son of god*”. “*Lord*” was a title reserved for Caesar as was “*Prince of Peace*.” If you've got to crown yourself, you're not in it for the right reasons. Luke says – Caesar did it one way. God does it this way. Humble, humble, humble.

The truest moments of transformation in our lives, however, are not often the trophy moments or public declarations but the humblest of shifts when God spoke to our hearts in a new way... when we allowed true growth to find its way in us – not a faux faith for the sake of any gratifying self-image.

Frederick Buechner says, “*True history has to do with the saving and losing of souls, and both of these are apt to take place when most people — including the one whose soul is at stake — are looking the other way. The real turning point in our lives is less likely to be the day we win the election or get married than the morning we decide not to mail the letter or the afternoon we watch the woods fill up with snow. The real turning point in human history is less apt to be the day the wheel is invented or Rome falls than the day a child is born in a stable.*”³

Yes. Christmas, in this spirit, is the story of your everyday moments turned sacred; your everyday “yes” to the next right thing offered in faith. Fear is a choice. So is faith. And beyond choosing faith, we can choose faithfulness... the embodiment of the faith we claim. Christ come close at Christmas is the embodiment of God's faith in humanity to be open to receiving God's Love.

I hope you'll receive it tonight. It's not so far, really. You're sitting at home, watching this service now, missing the crowd of the sanctuary, the children dressed up to get their church picture in front of the chancel Christmas tree, the seasoned saints dressed in that Christmas sweater that's seen every Christmas Eve for at least three decades. You're missing the voice of that young adult, who grew up singing in the church, now grown and gone but back home for Christmas singing behind you in their strong adult but still sweet voice you remember in children's choir gone by. But we're not so far,

³ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith* (HarperOne, 2009),156.

friends. In fact, the glow of this night can be seen from the heavens. Literally. NASA says so.⁴



In a new 200-page e-book, *Earth at Night*, NASA has compiled 25 years of satellite images taken when the planet was enveloped in darkness. In their years of study, the night where the most intense light is emitted to the universe is...? *Christmas*. For all the distance that has filled our lives this year, there is no brighter closeness than the *Light of the World*, come to us as a baby.

And so tonight... we want you to come join us if you are well and able to do so. You can join us live via our Facebook page if you cannot come in person, but for those who would... those who can... would you come now... as soon as Terry and I pull the light from the Christ candle. Come. Like the shepherds that first Christmas, make haste... come find Christmas in the flesh. Come be that light in the flesh tonight. It's a reveal party... not in any stereotypical binary sense of gender... not with explosives or fog machines or anything all that fancy. Just you... as you are. You reveal the light to the world again... no matter your past failures or your pains of this year or your shortcomings... none of that matters in God's great reveal of the brightest night the world has ever known. We'll take the Light of Christ in the sanctuary and bring it to you in the Broadway parking lot as soon as you can get here.

You'll be directed to a parking spot. You'll get out of your car (if you choose and when you're ready) and stand in front of your car... a safe distance from those parked around you. Nollie will start singing O Holy Night at 6:30. We'll hand out candles and we'll raise them high as we sing "*Silent Night*" to the heavens as a church family. It will be a beautiful sight and a soul-healing wonder... not because of the fanfare... but because nothing... not a single thing... can separate us from the love of God come close in Christ at Christmas. And when you drive out of the lot to the warmth of your homes, you'll be directed past one last gift... a live nativity... a Broadway babe in a manger... the revealing reminder that Christmas is not so far... not now, not ever. The very best reminder that anything... anything is possible. Thank God for this night... we'll see you shortly...

* *CHRIST* GRAPHIC USED WITH PERMISSION OF JENNY MCGEE.

⁴ Aria Bendix, "Dazzling NASA images from space show how holiday lights brighten the night across the globe," BusinessInsider.com, December 22, 2019.