



Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • December 24, 2021
Christmas Eve



The Scripture
Luke 2:8-14

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!”

The Message
“Right Here, Right Now: Together”
Mark Briley

“Christmas According to Kid’s Video”¹ (Open this link [HERE](#) to watch the video if reading digitally.)

“The new baby is going to change the world.” Is that not the most adorable thing you’ve ever seen? It’s raw and honest and real. There’s nothing like re-telling a story. And it’s always harder than you think it’s going to be. You read or hear some amazing account,

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suowe2czxcA>

and you go to tell someone else, and all you can muster is a few “uh’s” and “ummm’s” and “*How did that part go?*” Until you can tell a story in your own words, however, it’s just somebody else’s story. These beautiful children may have confused a handful of details, but they owned it. And, hey, I think bringing the baby Jesus a pair of Jordan’s would have been a fabulous gift. The story became their own.

And what is tonight about if not making the story of Christmas our own. If we don’t become a part of Christmas, we simply give it a nod, light a candle, and think, “*Cute story.*” In the move of God that first Christmas, however, we see first-hand that Christmas invites our own voice to be part of the story right here where we are, and right now as we live and breathe.

Think of the voices that are recorded in the limited Gospel accounts leading to the birth of Jesus. The angel Gabriel is the voice of disclosure. He shows up to all the major players and drops the news: “*You ain’t gonna believe this but it’s about to go down.*” Mary is the voice of wonder – “*You wanna run that baby thing by me one more time, Gabe? How can this be? May it be with me according to your word.*” Elizabeth is the voice of blessing – “*Blessed are you, Mary, and blessed is the baby within.*” Joseph is the voice of reason: “*You got to be kidding me? Pregnant?*” He weighs his options of getting out of this embarrassing mess or starting their marriage in a not-so-Pinterest sort of way. The voice of the innkeeper says, “*Not my problem.*” The voices of angel’s praise, “*Glory to God in the highest!*” The voices of shepherds declare all that they’ve seen and heard. And the voice of God cries out through a newborn’s lungs as if to say, “*Its cold out here! And why aren’t there any snacks?*”

Every voice in the story matters. Elizabeth’s welcome of Mary reminds us to ready ourselves for the ever new coming of Christ with a broader heart. Joseph’s coming around in faith beyond his sense of reason invites us to welcome a broader mind – one that grows in wisdom instead of succumbing to the seemingly rational initial assessment. The shepherds get the invitation to be part, a reminder of the broad reach that Jesus would extend throughout his life and invites us to reach all the same.

Everybody had to grapple with God-made-flesh for themselves so that they might claim Christmas as their own. To understand big mysteries, you must put them on small stages. What smaller stage than a manger? What more innocent participant than a baby?

In honesty, this whole scene is as if God was saying, “*Christmas isn’t going to happen on its own.*” If too few accept ownership of the story, it’s not going to happen.

The Rev. Dr. William Barber notes that we’re quick to offer up the line, “*Put the Christ back into Christmas,*” but that such is more of a feel-good line for us than truly

considering the reality of such a statement. He says, “We cannot forget the material reality of Christ’s life among us here on earth. Jesus was a brown-skinned baby, born in occupied territory, threatened by the mass-murder of a puppet-king who felt his power threatened.” The fact that Christmas happened at all is a miracle. The fact that Christmas continues to happen is the miracle we participate in even still.

People are always trying to put things like Christmas in their own words saying, “It’s like this...” Jesus said those words as much as anyone, his teaching in parables the most famous of all the world’s literature. “The kingdom of God is like...” he’d say, and then he’d paint a picture in a story that connected with whatever audience was in front of him.



Everett Patterson, a comic book illustrator, created this image a few years ago depicting the plight of Mary and Joseph in a modern-day world. There are many clever connections to the biblical account in this depiction; from Dave’s City Inn – Bethlehem, as it were, referred to as the City of David; the *Save More* sign above Maria’s head gives a hint toward the words Ave Maria. Advertisements for *Glad* and *Tide* make the newspaper on the ground in front of Jose. In this every-day-depiction, the essence of angst and the difficult path Christmas took to find us is readily felt. Every time I look at it, I find something new to appreciate.

question, in their minds, “What if Jesus was born today?” What if Christmas was today’s headline? In the scene, Joseph — sporting a man bun — holds up a cellphone to take a selfie, Mary flashes a peace sign and Baby Jesus, wearing a beanie on his head, looks on. [hipster wise people] The Three Wise Men ride in on Segways carrying Amazon Prime boxes, and a shepherd sends Snapchat messages about his experience to his virtual friends. Nearby, a cow enjoys gluten-free, all-natural grass feed next to a sheep wearing a Christmas sweater.



Oh, and there's a solar-powered stable, too. Originally selling for \$130, they are now collector's items that sell for much higher. I'm not sure how I really feel about this.



Another, more poignant depiction I encountered this week was this. The caption simply reads, "*A nativity scene without Jews, Arabs, Africans, or refugees.*"

A picture of the events of Christmas Episode One does not seem to make the cover of any Hallmark Christmas cards. We've tried to sanitize the

Christmas story, wrapping ourselves in familiar cocoons of easy, safe belief systems instead of following the living Christ into the trenches to bring peace to the world's pain. The real Christmas wonders if you're up for being an ongoing part of the story right here and now. And has it ever been more needed?

There are times when you know you are living a historical moment for the ages. COVID will always be associated with a historic season that future generations will ask us about. "*What was it like?*" "*How did you make it?*" "*Why did everyone fight about it so much?*" And... everyone will have a different response.

The world is emerging right here, right now, waking up from this historic pandemic. How we emerge could tell the better story of history. All the voices and depictions we've seen tonight were someone's response to Christmas. But we're watching the world wake up from history right now. We're *living* it.

And so, the real question tonight is this: "*How will you give voice to Christmas?*" Will you leave it as a cute story? Or will you own it in a new way? The gritty poet Wendell Berry used to say, "*Every day you have less reason not to give yourself away.*"

Every day you have less reason not to make good on Christmas in your own voice, perpetuating the whole reason God made the trek to be with us on that first Christmas: so that we wouldn't be alone – that we could come to know God's love as closely and intimately as holding a baby in our very arms.

At least three people this week said to me the most spiritual experience they had this year was holding a newborn baby close. If you've ever held a baby in your arms, you know that you have this innate response to care for it; protect it. Anyone you encounter along the way is going to want to know about this child in your arms. And most of the time, you're eager to give voice to the gift of life you are holding. The light you raise

tonight represents that very life. And it's for *you*, yes. But it's also for you to share with others. And once you find your way of sharing Christmas – well – the world lights up around you.

Maybe you saw the story about a neighborhood in Baltimore that has found their own way to give voice to Christmas. It started last year at this time. Kim Morton was home watching a movie with her daughter when she got a text from her neighbor, Matt Riggs, who lives directly across the street from her. Matt told her to peek outside. He had



hung a simple string of white Christmas lights that stretched from his home to hers. He said the lights were to remind her family they weren't alone despite the isolation of the pandemic. *"I was literally trying to brighten her world,"* he said. He knew his neighbor was facing a tough time dealing with depression and anxiety. She was also grieving the loss of a loved one and struggling with a toxic work environment. Matt could relate with the stress trying to guide his two teenagers through remote learning and the financial angst and struggles

and he said, *"It was just a terrible year for most all of us."* So, he literally brought the light to his neighbor, and little did he know, he would spark a movement in their neighborhood.

As neighbors noticed the single strand of lights in the darkness, the word spread and neighbor after neighbor started to follow suit, stringing lights from one side of the street to the other. Christmas became their physical sign of connection and love with their neighbors. There were mad dashes to Home Depot to buy out all the light strands. There were ladders and drills and rooftop adjustments and tangled tree climbing – whatever had to be done to string the lights horizontally. The neighborhood hadn't felt this kind of connection for a long while. *"It blew my mind,"* Matt Riggs said. *"It just happened. No planning. Just everybody owning their part in the growing story. From such a humble beginning, a tiny little act, became this incredible event. I thought I was just helping a neighbor who was down, and it turned out we all needed this!"*

Another neighbor joining the effort said, *"I'm a go-big-or-go-home kind of person."* She stayed up all night bending coat hangers, stringing lights around them in words that spelled, *"Love lives here."* And look what Christmas looks like on Dunkirk Road now.

And would you guess – other neighborhoods started doing it, too... and the Rodgers - Forge neighborhood residents said, “*We’re doing it again this year and every year to come. This is how we share Christmas.*” And the most profound impact of this impromptu effort was perhaps on the person for whom it was originally intended. Kim Morton said, “*It made me look up, literally and figuratively, above all the things that were dragging me down. It was light, pushing back the darkness.*”²



And this was the story of the first Christmas for Mary and Joe and the shepherds: “*Light, pushing back the darkness.*” This is our story to own right here and now, too.

Your voice. My voice. Our voice, together, raising the light again and again because that’s what our Gospel story demands we do. Like the kids said, “I love you, and you’re the best baby I’ve ever seen. There, I said it.”

What will you say about Christmas? It’s on us to share now. We put it in our own words, in our own actions, in our own stories, in our own times and places. How will you share Christmas?

Like a strand of lights, you hold a candle now with the invitation to stretch your light to your neighbors and **together**, we carry the story forward – light in the darkness for all to see. That is our story of Christmas tonight...

*Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin mother and child, holy infant so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.*

“SILENT NIGHT, HOLY NIGHT” – JOSEPH MOHR, 1863

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2021/12/21/baltimore-rodgers-forge-christmas-lights/?fbclid=IwAR3pK6q8UTSrmisCFq9tXDI8tgXUR5IUbep9MBoW2WHAfEI-ufGZanTlrS0>