



Go With the God We Have (and Who Has Us)

TEXT
Luke 2:1–20

December 24, 2020 — Christmas Eve — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

There is no night of the year that is more fun to be a parent than this one. So much of this night is about the children. And on this night, they are giddy and can't go to sleep. Leaving cookies for Santa; sneaking peeks out the bedroom window; listening for reindeer on the roof. It's a wonderful night.

It was a magical night for Mary and Joseph as well. They were filled with joy, no doubt. A child does that. They were also exhausted and confused I would imagine.

First of all, no parent wants to come face to face with the reality that the world has no room for your child. It's lonely. It goes from lonely to bizarre for this couple, as before the sun comes up, the shepherds arrive.

A few hours after our son Nathan was born, the nurse said, "You guys have a visitor." It was our friend Ernie. He said, "Take it from me, boys will test you." It was nice to share our joy with a friend.

But imagine if the knock on the stable and shepherds you had never met, didn't even know, showed up. "Sorry to intrude but we *had* to come. There were angels that told us about your son. Can we sing him a song we just

learned?" And it goes from being unwanted, to the unexpected, to the downright bizarre.

"Excuse us, we are from out of town ... way out of town. In our culture, when a king is born, such as your son, it is right to bring him gifts. Would you mind if we gave him gold and frankincense and myrrh? We didn't think about maybe a wagon, and we can see a cradle would have been nice."

In the midst of all this chaos, there is something we shouldn't miss. Mary and Joseph were parents now. And they were learning the things that parents learn. And one of the first things you learn is that even if you have memorized *What to Expect When You Are Expecting*, as soon as you hear that first cry, there is a sense of inadequacy that comes when you realize it's your job to raise a human. You have a job to do that you have no idea how to do. How long does the formula heat in the microwave? And what do you do when the fever comes at 2:00 a.m.? Who really knows how to work those car seats? And later, how do you know she's keeping up with math assignments? What happens the first time some carefree kid in 10th grade breaks her heart? And then there's that middle-of-the night phone call

when he's in tears because he wants to change his major from Pacific Island studies, but doesn't know what he wants to do with his life.

A baby will change you. He not only gives you a job to do that you don't know how to do. But more than that, when she takes that first breath, there is a part of your heart you didn't even know you had that comes to life. And that new part of your heart changes the way you see the whole world.

A few Sundays ago, I told you about my grandmother and her funny sayings. I shared with you, she would listen to me complain about mean teachers or the latest girl to break my heart, and she would say, "I'd give you my heart for the hurting times." If you don't remember that part of the sermon, you will remember the beautiful song that Becky and Nathan Bliss wrote about it. When I was a kid, I knew my grandmother said this because she cared for me, but I thought the saying was a rather ridiculous thing to say. She couldn't give me her heart.

But then our daughter Sarah was born, and I've told you before ... when she was born, she didn't breathe. In less than a minute, there were eight hos-

pital staff coming through the door feverishly working with my daughter, who was as blue as Whit Merrifield's batting helmet. Cindy, the nurse, was talking to her, "Come on, little one, come on. Breathe."

As unnecessary personnel, I was pushed out of the way. I was praying, "God, make her breathe. I haven't even said her name yet, make her breathe. God give her my breath."

Of course, she did. And she was fine. But I knew I would never be the same. And I finally understood my grandmother's wisdom ... because if I could, I would give that little girl my heart for the hurting times.

Having a child changes you because they bring to life a part of your heart you didn't even know you had. And that new part of your heart changes how you see the world.

The wonder of this night is that God hopes that if God comes to you, to us as a baby, this baby might bring to life a new part of our hearts and change how we encounter the whole world.

This baby reminds us that the only thing that matters is love. There is nothing else. You are who you love and who loves you. At the end of the day and at the end of our days, the only thing that will matter is who we love. That's our only job.

Walter Wangerin was a pastor, and he tells of ministry in his first church. He described the organist as a woman who had been on the organ bench longer than he had been alive. She was dying of cancer. He said, "I went to visit her. I didn't know what

to say, so I said everything. I entered chatting and covering my anxiety with noise. I spoke of the tulips and soft grass. I spoke of the birds singing and the singing we had done in worship and spoke of the day she might return to the organ bench; and she turned a black eye at me and held up a bony finger and said, 'Walter, shut up.'"

"I did shut up," he said. "In all my words I had been covering up the dignity of her dance with death."

"I visited again, but said nothing. I sat all afternoon until the shadows stretched across the floor, and with the shadows came the spirit, and I spoke the words given to me: 'I love you.' She said, 'I love you.'"¹

That's all that needed to be said.

I know it's a COVID Christmas.

I know for many who aren't used to it, there is little under the tree because there hasn't been a paycheck in a long time.

I know that there are too many known to us who know the ultimate tragedy of this relentless virus.

I know that in our public dialogue, there is not much evidence that anyone really trusts in love.

And I fear that this Christmas you are not able to be with everyone you want to be with and need to be with. Maybe you are not able to hug everyone you wish to hug. It leaves us longing.

But in a strange way, that may be a gift. For that longing bears witness to the truth of this night, that longing to be connected, that yearning to live

in love. It bears witness to the change that this baby brings to us and to that part of our hearts God brings to life.

This babe in Bethlehem was born for you — and reminds us that at the end of the day and at the end of our days, the only thing that matters is love.

May the love that this baby brings to life in us, shape how we live every moment. For there is really nothing else that matters.

That's why this baby was born this night, for you.

¹I heard this from Rev. Tom Currie, III, who delivered the Tom Currie Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in January 2010.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.