

Calvary Presbyterian Church
“Not What We Planned”
Christmas Eve—December 24, 2020
Thomas G. Speers, III

Lesson: Luke 2:1-20

The very first Christmas did not go as planned. I suspect that Mary, surprised as she was to be having a baby in the first place, was quite eager to have as normal a childbirth as possible in what was the most not normal situation. Once she explained her state of affairs to her parents and to Joseph, and they seemed to come to some understanding, I suspect that Mary started making plans for the birth of her baby. I imagine she wanted to be at home, in her own bed, surrounded by her own things, with her own pillows and blankets, adding a little familiar to her incredibly unfamiliar circumstances. Maybe she asked Joseph to make a cradle for the baby. Surely, she had him collect extra fuel to keep the house warm and extra food to keep them all fed. She might have asked her cousin Elizabeth, the older more experienced family member, to help her with the birth, after all she had given birth herself and would know how to support and care for a child giving birth to her own first child. Maybe Elizabeth could organize a baby shower so that they could have all the things that any family with a newborn needs. But we know that it did not go as Mary planned.

They had to travel to Bethlehem for a census and although every man knows not to make any suggestion that we know anything about being pregnant, I can't imagine that riding on a donkey for miles when far along in a pregnancy would be particularly comfortable. We can only imagine the conversation they must have had as they made their way and what might have been said when they finally got to Bethlehem and discovered that there wasn't any room for them in the inn. Couldn't Joseph have thought ahead to arrange for a place to stay? The only place available was a stable and that's where Mary had her baby, surrounded by animals and visited by strangers—shepherds and others from the East who claimed to have followed a star. It was not what she planned.

What she could not have known at the time but discovered looking back was that God was present right there in Bethlehem, bringing light into that darkness, bringing hope into that fearful time that was not what she had planned.

Across all our years, Christmas has not been perfect. We've eaten too much and found that even when we try, it is still difficult to get along with some people. We haven't received the present we hoped for and we all know the let down that often happens on Christmas Day when the presents are opened and something still is missing. We know the grief for loved ones who are not sitting around the table this year and the pain of facing Christmas with health, work and financial problems. We know that Christmas has not been perfect before, but this year is different. We are not all together, huddled in the church, lighting candles and singing our familiar songs. We are scattered and staying home and not able to gather in ways we took for granted. Christmas this year is not what we had planned.

Of course, right here, in the unplanned, dry, fearful, difficult time that we are facing, right here in this wilderness place, God is already at work as God has been at work before. The light shines in the darkness. Talitha Arnold writes, “Christmas reminds us that we need not fear the desert, nor the dry times of our own lives, nor the wilderness that this world can sometimes be. In the first Christmas, new life was born even in a desert time and place. This Christmas, in the desert places and times of our lives, new life can still be born. In dry, harsh landscapes—be they of our inner world or the world

around us—God is still present, just as God was present that cold night in Bethlehem. I think that’s very good news, this season and every season.”¹

Christmas this year is not what we planned, but Christmas never was. It isn’t about our plans; it is about God’s action in the midst of our broken lives. Christmas is about light shining in a land of deep darkness. It is right here in the darkness that God has a long history of being present. As Dorothy Jean Walker writes, “When God comes to be with God’s people, it is not to an idyllic, fairy-tale world. . . . There would in fact be no need for “God with us” in that “never never” world. The world that Jesus Emmanuel comes to is rather the real world . . . of poverty, extortion, callous cruelty, unrelenting terror and inconsolable grief. It is this world and none other into which God comes to be with us in the person of Jesus, the defenseless child and the crucified Messiah.”²

No Christmas isn’t what we planned this year, but it never really is. Instead, God comes to be with us in the real world right now, as God always does. Do not be afraid. God is bringing good news of great joy to all people and that includes you. Unto the likes of us, a savior has been born. Do not be afraid. Christmas is real most especially this year.

Let us pray: God of compassion, you watch our ways and weave out of terrible happenings wonders of goodness and grace. Surround us with a sense of your present love, and hold us in faith. Open our hearts to discover your presence and there to find comfort; through Jesus Christ, the Child of Bethlehem. Amen.

¹ Talitha Arnold, *Incarnation in the Desert*, *The Christian Century*, December 7, 2016.

² Dorothy Jean Weaver, in L. Gregory Jones, *Christmas Presence*, *The Christian Century*, December 20, 2000. Vol. 117 No. 36. © 2000.