

CHRISTMAS I 2024
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
Wilmington, Delaware
December 24, 2024

Every year we hear the same story. People walking in darkness see light. A few words about grace. Luke's story of the birth of Jesus. And, as part of that and along with the Psalmist, lots of singing.

And that's appropriate, because there's lots to sing about. But there's a somewhat overlooked reason why, and that's what I want to consider with you this night.

Luke takes great pains to place his lead characters in specific time. When John the Baptist begins his preaching, Luke names political and religious leaders whose time in office is well-documented. He does the same for the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, although we know that a couple of those weren't in office at the same time, so Luke obviously didn't Google his sources.

Historical accuracy isn't his goal anyway. When it comes to John, Luke names all those important persons only to point out that the word of God came instead to a relatively unknown preacher standing along the Jordan River. With the birth of Jesus, it takes on cosmic proportions. The eternal has broken through and joined human time, with all its limitations—and infinite possibilities.

And like the later story about John, Jesus' birth doesn't occur in an important place of power and prestige. His birth comes about as close as it can get to the creation narrative of humanity. He isn't formed out of the dust of the earth, but he's pretty much laid in it as his cradle.

The same holds true for those who first hear the news of his birth. Shepherds, usually the youngest of the family, who are not the principle heirs and therefore somewhat disposable in case a hungry wolf comes by, suddenly hear messengers telling them news that ought to be reserved for leaders of all types.

Since Luke's whole Gospel is about Good News coming to outsiders, to those deemed unworthy or unimportant, it's no surprise that it begins this way. After all, the eternal taking on finite characteristics is not how things usually work, even if we remember Greek mythology that was known in that time. But this reversal has more lasting implications for us.

Just as the eternal becoming human changes so much that we've been taught up until the birth of Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection changes everything that we've taught since then. This is the feast of the Incarnation, our name-day feast as Immanuel, meaning "God with us."

Since his birth, Jesus invites us to alter our own perceptions of time, even as our lives become increasingly measured by fractions of minutes and seconds and we get too

busy to notice even the light around us. In the events that will lead to the ending of Luke's Gospel, Jesus invites us to exchange our hurried and harried time-bound lives for the life that is eternal. And he shows us how to do that now, and not just after time is no longer measured by our breathing.

The eternal enters human time so that humanity might share a glimpse of the eternal in our time. You may have noticed that happening as this day moved toward the evening, and a sense of quietness settles all around us. Yes, there may be a few frenzied drivers still trying to get things done yesterday, and we'll need to be aware of their presence. But that stillness is a sign of the eternal that continues to break through into human time as God's gift of a breath of fresh air to nourish our souls. Those who have experienced it first hand may tell of that moment of eternity between the emergence of a newborn infant and its first cry of "I'm here!"

That gift of eternal time is ours to share each time we enter this place. We leave human time at the threshold as we seek to enter the presence of the eternal. We seek the face of the unknowable, praying for it to once again come in human flesh, only to be surprised that the invitation means that it is enfleshed in ourselves.

That is why we celebrate this night. It's why angels still sing, and shepherds still wonder. It is the light in our own darkness, inviting us to sing new songs of grace and mercy and love. It is God coming to us, inviting us to return the same Love that we find in the lowly mangers of our own lives, and that continue to exist all around us so that we can share it.