

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Saturday, December 24, 2022

Christmas Eve, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 9:2-7](#)

[Psalm 96](#)

[Titus 2:11-14](#)

[Luke 2:1-20](#)

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In all the news this year, news of wars, news of pandemics, news of droughts and floods, news of elections and court decisions, one thing happened this year that was a little less dramatic and got a little less attention. Somewhere on the planet, sometime probably in November of this year, a baby was born who was very much like every other baby, except this baby brought the population of the globe to eight billion.

Eight billion people living on this planet together. It's a staggering number to think about. And that's just those who are alive today; what about all the people who have ever lived? Scholars at a think tank called the Population Reference Bureau believe that starting 200,000 years ago, about 117 billion human beings have been born.¹

¹ "How Many People Have Ever Lived on Earth?" Population Reference Bureau, March 9, 2018, <https://www.prb.org/howmanypeoplehaveeverlivedonearth/>.

Imagine all those lives. A hundred billion stories, each as unique as yours or mine. Each one filled with drama, even if only the modest dramas of everyday life. Growing up; working; perhaps falling in love, having children; friends, family, moments of exhilaration, moments of grief. Some stories deeply tragic, cut short in a moment by war, sickness, or accident. Some relatively easy and pleasant. A few of them prominent, most not—of all those hundred billion, how many names are actually remembered in history? Several thousand, maybe? And the rest lost to us in the mists of time, even their tombstones long crumbled away, their names and precious stories known only to God.

Tonight we celebrate the birth of another baby, one whose name we do know, one whose story was written down and has gone on to change more lives than any other person in history. But he didn't come to those in his place and time who were powerful, or famous, or important. He didn't come to Emperor Augustus or Governor Quirinius. He came as an ordinary child born to ordinary parents, crowded into an improvised manger crib because there was no room for them in the inn. He came to us not to rule over us but to come alongside us as one of us, to show us what it is to love in humble service, to pour himself out for us as a gift, to share his own divine life with us so we could live as friends of God.

There were shepherds in the fields, the gospel tells us. The angels brought the good news not to the mayor of the town or the centurion of the local Roman army but to a group of laborers working late into the night. I think of all those who work in fields to produce the food and other things we all depend on, especially here in Sonoma County. I think of all those who work late at night caring for people in hospitals or stocking merchandise in stores or driving trucks or serving as first responders. I wonder where the angels would show up if they came tonight.

They come to the shepherds and the shepherds are terrified. But they don't stay terrified. As the angels share the good news of a Savior and then break into songs of praise, the shepherds move from fear, to hope, to joy ... and to action. At the end of the angels' song the shepherds get up. "Let's go," they say to one another. And they go to serve as witnesses to what has happened, to offer their praises to this newborn Savior, but more than that. They too are evangelists, as they share what they've seen and heard with Mary and Joseph. They too are bearers of good news, news that Mary will treasure and store in her heart as Jesus grows into his calling, toward the life that will send him out to preach and heal and share God's love with a world in need.

Tonight we celebrate that God loves you, and me, and every single one of the hundred billion and more of us who have ever lived, so much that God just had to come close to us, to come to us as one of us, to show us how to live a life that is fully human and fully alive. He gathered around himself a group of friends who were drawn to that life. And when those who were powerful were threatened by that life, by his eating and drinking with sinners, by his preaching good news to the poor, they killed him, but they couldn't quench that life. God raised him up to new and unending life and he pours that life into us. He's here among us tonight as we gather around his table. And he's here on this earth everywhere anyone is lonely or hurting or in need.

This Christmas I pray that just like the shepherds, we will be transformed by the good news of Jesus. That in a world full of so much pain, injustice, and fear, we will find ourselves moving from fear, to hope, to joy, and to action. That we will discover the life of Jesus welling up within each one of us, a life that makes us friends of God and friends of one another. And that God will use us to transform the world into a world more like what God has always dreamed for us, like the words we heard tonight from the prophet Isaiah, where all the yokes of slavery and all the weapons of war are broken and burned, where the people rejoice with joy at the abundant harvest, where there shall be endless peace.

I'd like to share a Christmas sonnet by the English poet Malcolm Guite, called "Christmas on the Edge."²

Christmas sets the centre on the edge;
The edge of town, the outhouse of the inn,
The fringe of empire, far from privilege
And power, on the edge and outer spin
Of turning worlds, a margin of small stars
That edge a galaxy itself light years
From some unguessed at cosmic origin.
Christmas sets the centre at the edge.
And from this day our world is re-aligned
A tiny seed unfolding in the womb
Becomes the source from which we all unfold
And flower into being. We are healed,
The end begins, the tomb becomes a womb,
For now in him all things are re-aligned.

² Malcolm Guite, "Christmas on the Edge," from <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2011/12/23/christmas-on-the-edge/>, accessed December 24, 2022.