

**From *How You Are to Who You Are***

First UMC of Pocatello

December 24, 2022

Luke 2:1-20

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My son is just about twenty-one months old, and he now fully understands that the things he sees shelved or hanging at stores can potentially be *for him*, and, come home *with him*. Jabbing his pointer finger at goldfish or socks or yellow toy construction trucks he will say over and over again, “Buy them. Buy them.” In the grocery store, this means that we usually get to the cash register with one bag of snacks already opened. It also explains how *Deck the Halls with Elmo*, a Sesame St. sing-along book, came to make its fateful journey last week from T.J. Maxx to our house. It’s currently his most-request-to-be-read book: “Every monster is preparing! Fa la la, la la la, la la la.”

For reasons he withholds, his favorite character seems to be Oscar the Grouch. The green trash-can-dwelling monster is featured on two pages of the book. First, he just peeks out from beneath his aluminum lid. But only turn the page, and he’s fully out of the can, singing along all holly-jolly-like with everyone else, in sharp contrast to his essential grumpiness.

It’s a silly but good reminder that people arrive at the Christmas season, and especially at a worship service on Christmas Eve, after having traversed very different kinds of emotional terrain. Tonight doesn’t *feel* the same to every person here. And that can be uncomfortable given all the momentum we carry into this service. “Tis the season to be jolly!” But it *is* the truth. And one of the things I love about the Christmas story is that it starts with that truth as its premise. There are many different kinds of people who converged on Bethlehem. Noticing the differences helps us understand and name with some accuracy and honesty just how *we* are doing tonight.

Take Joseph. Joseph unsettled his family at a vulnerable time for them (Mary was due to have her baby any day), and trekked south ninety miles from Nazareth to Judea in order to obey a distant but nevertheless heavy-handed order from Caesar Augustus. He had to go to his place of origin and register himself as a citizen of the Roman Empire. He went home to be counted among his people, a journey that might've ended with a door thrown open and a shout of recognition and an entrance into some warm room full of light and music. But when he got there, there was no one and nowhere to host him, so he scrounged about until he found a manger. He felt like a stranger even as he added his name to the rolls.

I imagine that some of you are returning to something that doesn't feel quite like home anymore. Maybe you've literally come from out of town to be here, in the city or house or the congregation of your birth, but you've done so because you're supposed to, because someone wants or needs you to, not because, deep down, you really wanted to. Or maybe the returning and the registering has less to do with travel and more to do with some inner compulsion to be here, at church, perhaps in this Methodist tradition, singing the carols and hearing the stories. After all, it's the "reason for the season," it's what you were raised to do, it's what you maybe even loved to do before... before that sense of distance or weariness crept in.

You feel like Joseph, returning to traditional terrain but finding only the most marginal of resting places. All around you, others seem so much more naturally to belong. Yet you *are* here, registering your presence with this people, and that must count for something.

Then there were those shepherds in the fields beyond the edges of Bethlehem. They had made a home for themselves in the darkness of the night. Born into the lowest of the laboring classes, the night-shift shepherds had long been engulfed by a sense of vast, dim isolation whose consolations had grown old. At first, they thought it a strange relief to be out there alone with their thoughts, but how quickly those thoughts started

to run in circles. The stars spread above, though striking – how mechanically and distantly they traveled along their fated routes. Long estranged from the company of others, news came to the shepherds last, and it came stale. The demands of living out of doors had roughened them. They had forgotten how to converse with ease. Night after night they lay, whistling their lonesome field-tunes to no accompaniment. And even those sheep, the ones they watched over with something akin to love, were discernible only as faint outlines among the shadows.

Some of you have come in out of the dark, and perhaps you have carried the dark in with you. Christmas can be a tough, guilt-ridden time for those actively struggling with grief or depression or sickness or isolation or addiction. Those whole-self afflictions are like fields in the night that offer only the most short-sighted of visions. The overall feeling is one of being trapped, particularly in loneliness. The joy and hopefulness of the holiday is simply inaccessible. God seems absent; people seem indifferent; work seems hollow; music seems thin. Some of you are here experiencing that sharp clash of moods.

And, finally, there was Mary. Mary, whose whole self – body, mind, and spirit – had been the very center of God’s mysterious work in the world. Mary was *on fire for God*: passionate, joyful, thankful, humbled, living in the spirit, singing spontaneous songs of praise, keenly attentive to the unfolding of events, and urgently collecting memories to be panned again and again in the coming days for their gleaming meanings. Mary had been overwhelmed and uncertain when the angel had first revealed what God desired to do through her, but she yielded herself nonetheless and, my goodness, she was vindicated and blessed for it. With her child at last in her arms, she gazed in wonder at the manifestation of all that God had promised. *Surely, all generations shall call me blessed*, she mused.

Perhaps you’re here musing something like that, too. You are the active and involved one, moving gracefully in synch with the Spirit, living in your purpose, caught up in the rhythms of worship and learning and

service. You are ready to celebrate Emmanuel, for you have experienced faith not merely as an assent to some idea, but as an awareness of a holy presence within, as a co-creating and birthing of dreams. Grateful, centered, wide-eyed, innocently impressionable, maturely reflective – for you the leaping choruses of these carols and each burning candle seems to confirm the good news you’ve already been bearing. You are Oscar the Grouch out of the can, belting out your Fa la la la la la’s with all your might.

I’ve said a lot about *how* we might be doing tonight. But the gift of the gospel story goes beyond just a reflection of our predicament. There is a light dawning on all the characters in this story, as well as on all of us. There is a good Word for us to hear.

God comes to us on Christmas not just to help us say *how we are* but more importantly to tell us *who we are*. I’m going to say that again. God comes to us on Christmas not just to help us say *how we are* but also to tell us *who we are*.

Who *are we* underneath all this feeling?

Who are we to the Christ who has come to us as one of us that he could know us from the inside out?

What are our true names this Christmas Eve?

Well, if you *feel* like Joseph, showing up because you’re supposed to show up no matter how estranged you may feel from the heart of the matter, you are the *One God Surprises with More*. In God’s eyes, you are more than just a number, and your presence means more than just an obligation fulfilled. You are more than your intentions. More than your compliance or your resistance. For *you* there is something – there is someone – being born in your midst, a gift that cannot be accounted for,

that you could not have foreseen when you came to do your duty. There is a miracle taking shape in your life, sometimes exactly at the site of your beleaguered frustration, in that manger that's become a sanctuary filled with the cries of new life. Whether you can *feel* it right now or not, whether you ever come to really know it or not, you will leave here tonight with something that you did not come here with, something that was not, and never could've been, registered. With God, there is always something going on that the official record won't reflect.

Welcome to Bethlehem, Those Who God Surprises with More.

And to you shepherds among us, making your bed in darkness: you are *the Sought-Out Ones of Heaven*. You are *The First Witnesses*. You are *The Bearers of the News*. Turns out that the darkness that you are in is not all that dark to God. God and God's angels have had no trouble navigating through it to get to you. The night is as bright as the day! And look up! Upon those predetermined cycles of the starry lights there is superimposed a heavenly host singing their glad tidings. They have summoned you to your feet, and sent you across the threshold of the dark into the warm light and holy company of God's family – to see and to tell. Out of your cracked lips will come words of prophecy clothed in gentleness fit for a mother and her newborn baby. And in the wrinkled face of that vulnerable baby, cradled by a peasant mother in the poverty of the manger, you will see yourself reflected in the face of God, and you will know how impossible it will be, no matter what lies before or behind you, for you to ever go a greater distance from God than God has already come for *you*.

Welcome to Bethlehem, Sought-Out Ones of Heaven.

And for you Mary's, who have come here *already* thankful, *already* joyful, *already* spiritually attuned – even for you there is a *who* underneath the *how*. It'll be important to remember that when the majesty of the evening gives way to the steady work of feeding and diaper changing and

swaddling and soothing. You are *the One for Whom Faith Is Still Joy*. You are a *Gathering Place for Many Messengers*. You are a *Living Sign for Weary*. You remind us just how closely Jesus desires to be to us. You remind us that God desperately wants to fulfill God's promises to us. Your quiet confidence clears a space of gathering for the Josephs and the Shepherds, for the angels and the seekers, for kings and for laborers. We need your joy to rouse us and your wonder to steady us. Thank you, *One for Whom Faith is Still Joy*, for burning brightly among us, and reminding us that God has made God's home with us in Bethlehem.

Friends, we are these people. Not only tonight, but all nights. We gather as them, and they assemble within us. They help us to say *how* we are so that we might hear *who* we are.

We are those who belong, even if we *feel* like we're just showing up.

We are children of the light, even if we struggle to see beyond the darkness.

We are a spacious place where God meets the world, especially in your joy.

You know, when the angels appeared in the sky and sang, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace..." this is part of what's inside that word "peace" – a story to carry us from *how we are* to *who we are*. Such a story is always freely and gently offered to us. All we must do is open our hearts to truly hear it.

May you receive the peace of God this Christmas.

Amen.