



**CHRISTMAS EVE
DECEMBER 24, 2018
“HOW FRAGILE”**

LUKE 2: 1-14

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.



SERMON

IF YOU'VE SPENT ANYTIME IN A CHURCH, YOU'VE LIKELY SEEN A SUNDAY SCHOOL CHRISTMAS PLAY WITH KIDS DRESSED IN BATHROBES ACTING OUT THE ROLES OF MARY, JOSEPH, AND THE INNKEEPER, WHO TELLS THEM "THERE IS NO ROOM IN THE INN."

INGRAINED IN OUR MEMORIES, IT APPEARS THE HOLY FAMILY ARRIVE AT A *MOTEL SIX* ONLY TO FIND OUT ALL THE ROOMS ARE TAKEN BECAUSE OF A PLAYOFF GAME AT HEINZ FIELD.

OH, LIKELY, NOT THIS YEAR. I'M STILL A LITTLE DEPRESSED.

BUT, THAT'S NOT THE WAY IT WAS. THE STORY IS A LITTLE BIT DARKER AND A LOT MORE HUMAN.

THE WAY INTO THIS STORY IS FOR ME TO TALK ABOUT WHAT IT'S LIKE TO MOVE TO PITTSBURGH AND HAVE TO LEARN A NEW LANGUAGE, YINZERS.

I FIND OUT IT'S NOT CALLED BOLOGNA, IT'S CALLED JUMBO. JUDY ALBERTH CAME INTO THE CHURCH OFFICE AND SAID, "I NEED SOME GUMBANDS." WHAT??!! MY WIFE CALLED SOMEONE A NEBBY AND I LOOKED AT HER LIKE SHE HAD LOST HER MIND.

AND THEN THERE'S THE WHOLE CULTURAL DIFFERENCE. FRENCH FRIES ON YOUR SALAD AND YOUR SANDWICH?

NOBODY OUTSIDE WESTERN PA HAS A CLUE ABOUT *PITTSBURGH DAD*.

AND I NEVER HEARD OF A PIEROGIE OR ISALY'S CHIPPED HAM BEFORE MOVING HERE.

WELL, IT'S THE SAME CHALLENGE WITH A LOT OF THE BIBLICAL LANGUAGE.

WHEN WE HEAR THE WORD MANGER, WE LIKELY THINK OF A BARN OR A STABLE. WHEN WE HEAR THE WORD "INN," WE THINK OF A MOTEL OR A BNB. AND SO, WE HAVE THIS SUNDAY SCHOOL CHRISTMAS PLAY PICTURE IN OUR HEAD.

THERE WAS NO ROOM AT THE INN. JESUS BORN IN A MANGER.

BUT HERE'S THE REAL STORY, YOU JAGOFFS.



THE HOUSE OF THE SIMPLE FOLKS OF JESUS' DAY HAD TWO ROOMS.

THE MAIN ROOM WAS A "FAMILY ROOM" WHERE THE ENTIRE FAMILY COOKED, ATE, SLEPT, AND LIVED. AT THE END OF THIS FAMILY ROOM WAS AN INNER DOOR THAT LED TO A ROOM A FEW FEET LOWER. AT NIGHT, THROUGH AN OUTSIDE DOOR, THE FAMILY COW, DONKEY, SHEEP, AND GOATS WERE BROUGHT INSIDE THIS LOWER ROOM SO THEY WOULDN'T BE STOLEN.

THE WORD TRANSLATED AS "INN," USED ELSEWHERE IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE IS TRANSLATED AS "UPPER ROOM."

YOU GOT ALL THAT SO FAR, YINZ GUYS?

THIS SETS US UP FOR THE REAL STORY OF CHRISTMAS.

MARY IS PREGNANT, BUT BY THIS TIME THEIR TWO FAMILIES KNOW THE BABY IS NOT JOSEPH'S BABY. HE'S LIKELY A MUCH OLDER MAN, WHICH MAKES THE SITUATION ALL THAT MUCH MORE SUSPICIOUS. THERE'S TALK AS TO WHETHER JOSEPH IS EVEN CAPABLE OF FATHERING A CHILD.

WE KNOW MARY AND JOSEPH ARE RETURNING TO BETHLEHEM FOR THE CENSUS BECAUSE THIS IS WHERE JOSEPH'S FAMILY IS FROM—IT'S LIKE EVERYONE RETURNING TO HOMETOWN PITTSBURGH FOR THE HOLIDAY.

SO, THEORETICALLY, THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM FOR MARY AND JOSEPH AT HIS FAMILY'S HOME, RIGHT? ALL YOUR FAMILY COMES IN FOR CHRISTMAS AND YOU MAKE ROOM FOR THEM. THE GUEST ROOM, THE FAMILY ROOM, THE BASEMENT SOFA THAT PULLS OUT INTO A DOUBLE BED. SLEEPING BAGS ON THE FLOOR FOR THE KIDS.

WHAT THE CHRISTMAS STORY REALLY IS SAYING IS THAT THE FAMILY IS **NOT** GOING TO MAKE ROOM FOR MARY AND JOSEPH IN THE UPPER ROOM, WHERE THE FAMILY COOKS, EATS, SLEEPS, AND LIVES.

THEY ARE CHOOSING **NOT** TO MAKE ROOM FOR THIS UNWED MOTHER. THE BIRTH OF JESUS OCCURS IN A ROOM WHERE THE ANIMALS ARE KEPT AT NIGHT AS IF TO SAY, "MARY, YOU NO BETTER THAN THE ANIMALS."



MARY, SHAMED AND REJECTED BY JOSEPH'S FAMILY.

AND THIS IS AFTER, WHAT? SIX MONTHS OF SHAME AND REJECTION BY THE PEOPLE OF HER VILLAGE WHEN HER EXPANDING BELLY BEGINS TO SHOW.

WHAT CHRISTMAS REVEALS IS HOW MESSY ARE OUR LIVES. HOW FRAGILE OUR RELATIONSHIPS.

WHETHER OR NOT YOU BELIEVE IN THE VIRGINAL CONCEPTION, I BET WE CAN ALL AGREE THAT THE ANGEL WHO APPEARED TO MARY DID NOT ALSO APPEAR TO EVERYONE ELSE IN THE VILLAGE TO TELL THEM THAT HER CHILD HAD BEEN FATHERED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.

HOW MESSY OUR LIVES. HOW FRAGILE OUR RELATIONSHIPS.

SHE IS BLESSED BY GOD, BUT SHAMED AND HUMILIATED BY EVERYONE ELSE. WE MAY PAINT HER AS THE LADY IN GORGEOUS ROBES AND A HALO PLAYING WITH HER INFANT GOD/SON. BUT THIS IS ALL AFTER THE FACT.

IN HER LIVED LIFE, SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO THE CONTEMPT OF HER NEIGHBORS.

AND WHAT ABOUT THIS CUTE LITTLE BABY BOY, JESUS, WHO WE PLACE IN HIS CRIB AS THE HOLIEST OF CHILDREN. THE GOSPELS LET US KNOW THAT JESUS IS TAUNTED THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE AS HAVING NO KNOWN FATHER. HE IS CALLED "SON OF MARY." ACCORDING TO JEWISH RELIGIOUS LAW, IF YOUR ARE BORN LEGITIMATELY, YOU ARE CALLED "SON OF THE FATHER." SO I AM SCOTT, SON OF KEN.

BUY JESUS IS CALLED "SON OF MARY," WHICH INDICATES HE DOES NOT HAVE A FATHER. EXCUSE MY FRENCH, BUT THE LITERAL TRANSLATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT GREEK IS "JESUS, MARY'S BASTARD."

HOW MESSY OUR LIVES. HOW FRAGILE OUR RELATIONSHIPS.

IT'S NOT A STRETCH TO CONCLUDE THAT JESUS' EMPHASIS THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE IS ON FORGIVENESS AND ACCEPTANCE BECAUSE OF HIS OWN EXPERIENCE OF BEING TREATED AS WHITE TRASH ALL HIS LIFE.



WHEN WE KNOW THE TRUTH OF HIS BIRTH, IT CHANGES HOW WE THINK ABOUT CHRISTMAS, DOESN'T IT?

IT'S NOT SO SENTIMENTAL. IT'S NOT A HALLMARK HOLIDAY SPECIAL. SNOW GENTLY FALLING ON A COLD, CLEAR NIGHT. THE MOON GLOWING OVER A PRISTINE LANDSCAPE. HOT CHOCOLATE AROUND THE FIREPLACE....

BUT, IF WE HEAR THE STORY IN AS IT WAS CONVEYED TO THE FIRST BELIEVERS, IT IS DIVINELY COMFORTING.

GOD COMES TO EARTH, NOT AS WINNER OF THE BEAUTIFUL BABY CONTEST WITH HIS CEO FATHER AND MISS BETHLEHEM MOTHER. **JESUS IS BORN INTO A FAMILY AS MESSED UP AS OUR FAMILIES!**

IN MY FIRST CONGREGATION, I WOULD VISIT MISS ANNIE WHO WAS IN HER NINETIES, BUT AS LIVELY AND ORNERY AS SOMEONE HALF HER AGE. AND SHE LOVED TO TELL ME STORIES ABOUT ALL THE RESPECTABLE FOLKS IN MY CONGREGATION. STORIES ABOUT WHO GOT PREGNANT BEFORE MARRIAGE. OR WHO HAD A BABY SIX MONTHS AFTER THEIR WEDDING. OR WHO HAD BEEN IN AND OUT OF JAIL AS A YOUNG MAN.

SHE WASN'T BEING MEAN. SHE WASN'T BEING JUDGMENTAL. SHE HAD RAISED A LITTLE HELL IN HER YOUNGER YEARS WHICH SHE DELIGHTED IN TELLING ME ABOUT. WHAT SHE COULDN'T STAND WAS ANYONE WHO ACTED LIKE THEY WERE BETTER THAN OTHERS.

ANYONE WHO WANTED TO DENY THAT OUR LIVES ARE MESSY. DENY THE FRAGILITY OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS....

TONIGHT WOULD HAVE BEEN MY PARENTS' WEDDING ANNIVERSARY. I COULDN'T TELL YOU HOW MANY YEARS THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN MARRIED, BECAUSE THEY'RE LONG DEAD. MY MOM MURDERED. MY DAD COMMITTING SUICIDE.

ONE THING I KNOW TO BE TRUE IS THAT OUR LIVES ARE NOT HALLMARK HOLIDAY SPECIALS. WE GATHER TOGETHER IN THIS PLACE, ALL OF US CARRYING IN OUR HEARTS THE BROKENNESS OF OUR LIVES. BELOVED FAMILY MEMBERS NO LONGER WITH US IN THE PEWS NOR SITTING AROUND THE CHRISTMAS DAY DINING ROOM TABLE. FAMILIES TORN APART BY DIVORCE. UNBLENDED BLENDED FAMILIES. ADDICTION RAVAGING SO MANY OF OUR FAMILIES, LEAVING



DESTRUCTION AND DEATH IN ITS WAKE. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE. UNEMPLOYMENT. UNDEREMPLOYMENT. OUR VETERANS, ESTEEMED WHILE OVERSEAS AND ALL BUT FORGOTTEN ONCE THEY RETURN HOME.

HOW MESSY OUR LIVES. HOW FRAGILE OUR RELATIONSHIPS....

THERE WAS A FAMILY WHERE LITTLE JOHNNY HAD NOT HAD A VERY GOOD YEAR. IN TROUBLE AT SCHOOL, NEVER LISTENING AT HOME.

HIS MOTHER TOLD HIM HE WOULD BE GETTING NOTHING FOR CHRISTMAS.

“WHAT?!! NOTHING FOR CHRISTMAS?” CRIED JOHNNY.

“WELL, MAYBE IF YOU WRITE A LETTER TO BABY JESUS AND TELL HIM HOW SORRY YOU ARE, SANTA WILL BRING YOU SOME PRESENTS.”

SO, JOHNNY WENT TO HIS ROOM AND BEGAN WRITING. WITH EACH LETTER, HE WOULD FIRST APOLOGIZE AND THEN PROMISE TO BE GOOD FOR A SPECIFIC AMOUNT OF TIME, BUT HE WOULD GET FRUSTRATED, TEAR UP EACH LETTER AND START OVER.

FINALLY, HE GAVE UP, RAN TO THE LIVING ROOM, TOOK MOTHER MARY FROM THE FAMILY'S NATIVITY SCENE, RAN BACK TO HIS ROOM, WRAPPED HER IN A SOCK, AND PLACED HER IN HIS BOTTOM DRAWER.

HE GOT OUT A PIECE OF PAPER AND BEGAN WRITING, “DEAR BABY JESUS, IF YOU EVER WANT TO SEE YOUR MOTHER AGAIN...”

ON A MORE SOMBER NOTE, ONE OF MY CLIENTS IN THERAPY GAVE ME PERMISSION TO TELL YOU HER STORY THIS EVENING.

BARELY OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL, SHE FOUND HERSELF PREGNANT. SHE WASN'T SURE OF THE FATHER. IT COULD BE ONE OF TWO MEN, BUT NEITHER MAN WAS IN HER LIFE ANYMORE.

HOW MESSY OUR LIVES. HOW FRAGILE OUR RELATIONSHIPS.

WHAT WAS SHE TO DO?



BECAUSE OF HER ETHNIC AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND, HER FAMILY WAS AGHAST AT THE PREGNANCY, FEELING IT BROUGHT SHAME AND DISHONOR TO THE FAMILY. SHE WAS LEFT ALONE TO DECIDE WHAT TO DO. EVENTUALLY SHE DECIDED THAT SHE WOULD LIVE AT A CHRISTIAN HOME FOR UNWED MOTHERS AND DELIVER THE BABY.

DURING HER LAST MONTHS OF PREGNANCY, SHE MADE THE DECISION TO GIVE UP HER CHILD FOR ADOPTION. AND SHE CHOSE A COUPLE WHO COULD NOT HAVE CHILDREN AS THE BABY'S ADOPTIVE PARENTS. IN THE WEEKS BEFORE GIVING BIRTH, THE HOME ASKED HER IF SHE WOULD PARTICIPATE IN A VIDEO BEING MADE TO HELP OTHER YOUNG PREGNANT WOMEN CHOOSE ADOPTION. SHE READILY AGREED AND A LOCAL COUPLE WHO HAD A VIDEO BUSINESS CAME AND RECORDED HER TELLING ABOUT HOW SHE CAME TO THE DECISION TO GIVE UP HER BABY FOR ADOPTION.

AND THEN, ONLY A FEW HOURS AFTER GIVING BIRTH, SHE SAID GOODBYE TO HER LITTLE BABY BOY.

HOW SAD OUR LIVES. HOW FRAGILE OUR RELATIONSHIPS.

OVER THE YEARS, SHE STAYED IN TOUCH WITH THE COUPLE, SENDING HER SON GIFTS ON HIS BIRTHDAY AND CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE ADOPTION AGENCY. HIS ADOPTIVE PARENTS SENDING HER PHOTOS AND UPDATES. UNTIL, A FEW WEEKS AGO, THE COUPLE CONTACTED HER ABOUT GETTING TOGETHER WITH THEM AND HER SON, NOW NEARLY TWENTY-ONE.

AND THEY MET LAST WEEK. MEETING AT A RESTAURANT, GOING OUT FOR ICE CREAM, LEAFING THROUGH A PHOTO ALBUM OF THE HIGH POINTS OF HIS LIFE.

HE'S NOW IN COLLEGE, MAJORING IN MUSIC. SEEMS LIKE HE CAN JUST ABOUT PLAY ANY INSTRUMENT HE PICKS UP. HANDSOME, A TOP STUDENT, A SWEET HUMAN BEING, KIND, THOUGHTFUL, ACTIVE IN HIS CHURCH AND THEIR PRAISE BAND.

AND, IT TURNS OUT, SHE HAD CHOSEN AS HIS ADOPTIVE PARENTS THE COUPLE WHO SHOT THE VIDEO TWENTY-ONE YEARS AGO....

GOD COMES INTO OUR LIVES AS FRAGILE AS WE ARE—A BABY, DISCREDITED FROM BEFORE THE MOMENT OF HIS BIRTH. HIS MOTHER SHAMED AND REJECTED. BUT HIS LIFE AND HERS WERE REDEEMED BY THE FATHERLY ENERGY AT THE HEART OF THE UNIVERSE. AND HIS LIFE



CONTINUES TO HAVE THE POSSIBILITY TO REDEEM OUR LIVES. THIS IS THE ONGOING CHRISTMAS MIRACLE....

THE REAL STORY OF BIRTH OF JESUS SHOWS US HOW MESSY OUR LIVES. HOW FRAGILE OUR RELATIONSHIPS.

GOD COMES TO US AS A NEW BORN BABY IN HIS OWN MESSY FAMILY. A FRAGILE INFANT, DEPENDENT ON OTHERS. SNUGGLING INTO THE WARMTH OF HIS MOTHER WHO MUST KEEP HIM ALIVE....

OUR HOLY ASSIGNMENT THIS CHRISTMAS—EACH ONE OF US—IS TO ALLOW THE LOVE, THE GRACE, THE ACCEPTANCE OF GOD TO GROW IN OUR HEARTS. GOD’S TENDER AND QUIET PRESENCE BIRTHING IN OUR HEARTS.

ACCEPT ALL THOSE WE MIGHT WANT TO JUDGE. LOVE THE UNLOVELY. PRAY FOR PEACE. MEND YOUR RELATIONSHIPS. WELCOME THE STRANGER. OUT OF YOUR ABUNDANCE GIVE TO OTHERS. INVITE GOD TO CLEAN UP THE MESS OF YOUR LIFE. AND VALUE YOUR OWN LIFE.

JESUS IS BORN IN THE LOWER ROOM WITH THE ANIMALS. THAT’S WHERE WE WILL FIND GOD. IN THE MESS ALL AROUND US.

SERMON SONG

[WINTER SNOW](#) BY AUDREY ASSAD