



From the Pulpit: December 24, 2023

Christmas Eve

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Luke 2:1–20

The New O Antiphons, VI: O Lord of every path and passageway...

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

*Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth 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 heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”
When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So*

they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

“O Lord of every path and passageway,
Door and Key and Bridge across the abyss,
Flashlight in the darkness, blackout’s Candle,
steady us on our way with your bright wisdom.
Make us quick and nimble with our love
on the Jesus-path of kindness—no detours!
Resurrection Lord, light our way home.
—Diane Tucker, Forty New O Antiphons”

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus’ birth in very different ways, and it’s fun to set them side by side to compare and contrast.

Matthew, for instance, is the middle-class Gospel. Matthew tells the story from Joseph’s perspective and Mary is in the background with little more than a walk-on role.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Joseph and Mary are not **visiting** Bethlehem when Jesus is born; they **live** there; they’re not **from** Nazareth. Joseph is a successful tradesman who hammers together bookshelves and kitchen tables for rich people. He owns a house on a pleasant street in Bethlehem and that’s where Jesus is born; in a **house**, not a **stable**.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus’ first worshipful congregation is three visiting dignitaries from Babylon. They’re intellectuals who occupy department chairs at places like MIT, Harvard, and Penn.

It's possible that Matthew's congregation was filled with prosperous parishioners in stereotypical families with two parents, two kids, a golden retriever, a picket fence, and good jobs.

The Gospel of Luke, on the other hand, is the anti-Matthew. Luke puts Mary at center stage and it's Joseph who has the walk-on role. And Mary of course is an unwed teenage mother; she is probably 14 years old; she probably became a woman months before she got pregnant. Not to put too fine a point on it, Jesus is illegitimate.

With sloppy prenatal planning, Mary and Joseph find themselves on the road when the labor pains begin, and they arrive in a tiny town crowded with visitors registering for Caesar's sinister census and they can't find an Airbnb to save their lives, so famously, Mary delivers Jesus in a stable and lays him in a manger so the donkey won't step on his head.

In Luke, Jesus' first worshipful congregation are not intellectuals with Ph.D.'s in astronomy but shepherds, some of the most scorned citizens of first-century Palestine. They slept under the stars in the fields and smelled like sheep. Lawyers and judges thought shepherds were such devious liars and shameless cheats that they were not allowed to testify in a court of law.

It's possible that Luke's congregation was filled with blue collar people and Uber drivers and day laborers from the gig economy. Luke wanted his congregation to know that Jesus came for them too, in fact came **primarily** for them. Bible scholars are fond of talking about St. Luke's pronounced, powerful, persistent, pervasive, peculiar preference for the poor, the pitiful, and the persecuted.

Today of course, Bethlehem is in the West Bank, about 45 miles from Gaza. In a creche there today, Jesus wears a Palestinian keffiyeh; his manger contains broken bricks instead of hay. A Lutheran Pastor there says, "God is under the rubble in Gaza, this is where we find God right now."¹ That's not too far from the point Luke wants to get across in his Gospel.

It's clear that Matthew is **our** Gospel. It's Matthew who's preaching to us—two parents, two kids, a golden retriever, a picket fence, and good jobs in Wilmette, Winnetka, and the Loop, and many of us have Ph.D.'s, MBA's, JD's, and MD's.

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different ways,
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Still we study Luke hard. In fact, Luke's story might be our favorite. And we're learning about Luke's preference for the poor.

Let me tell you about one recent day in my life, and then I'll quit and we can all light candles and sing *Silent Night*.

Last Wednesday a bunch of us went down to Altgeld Gardens on Chicago's far South Side, 132nd Street, about as far as you can go and still be in Chicago. Katie was there. Sarah was there. John was there. Lester and Becky, Laura and Dana, George, Elizabeth, Margot and Mark Bowen, were all there, others.

Altgeld Gardens is a community of meager resources. It's sometimes called a toxic doughnut because it's surrounded by expressways, railroad tracks, and abandoned factories. The soil is too polluted to grow anything. It's also called a food desert, because the nearest grocery store is five miles away, and no one has cars.

¹Yara Bayoumy and Samar Hazboun, “‘God Is Under the Rubble in Gaza’: Bethlehem's Subdued Christmas,” The New York Times, December 24, 2023.

And so thanks to Margot and Mark Bowen and others, you all donated a million dollars to an organization called By the Hand so that they can construct a vertical garden in Altgeld Gardens. This ordinary shipping container will soon be filled with towers of light and water for growing vegetables. They will grow as many vegetables in this ordinary shipping container as you could grow on four acres of farmland. And because of you, Altgeld Gardens will no longer be a food desert.

By the Hand runs an after-school program for the children of Altgeld Gardens. We met some of their splendid teachers, and the ninth graders who traveled to Boston to learn how to maintain a vertical garden.

So last Wednesday I went down to Altgeld Gardens. Took me 90 minutes each way. When I got back to my office late in the afternoon, there was a genuine letter on my desk. Do some of you remember what letters are? Real paper, an envelope, a USPS stamp?

The letter was from St. Paul AME Church in Glencoe—African Methodist Episcopal. It's less than a mile from my house. St. Paul has been there since 1884; it's older than Kenilworth Union. Arsonists burnt the first church to the ground in 1930. They built their second church out of wood from Italian American and African Americans homes which were condemned to build a parkway on Vernon Avenue.

This brick church is their third spiritual home, built in the 1990's, so they have a substantial mortgage. You are paying that mortgage. Your gift comes from the Bowen Fund. Kenilworth Union, you see, wants to make sure St. Paul AME will stand there for another 139 years. At least.

The letter told me that St. Paul AME is awarding Kenilworth Union its Faith and Action Award, which they will present to us on The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Sunday in January, because, the letter says, Kenilworth Union embodies Dr. King's values. Could a church like this get a richer compliment than that?

I haven't talked to their pastor yet, but when I do, I'm going to say, "You know, Pastor Hayes, there's nobody whiter than Kenilworth Union. Should you really be giving a Martin Luther King award to people as white as us?" And I know what she's going to say: "Damn straight I will!"

My best friend lives in Lake George, New York. He checks in with me by phone every couple of weeks. He called just as I was finished reading that letter. He asked me, "So how was your day?" And I wanted to tell him about the dedication and about the letter, but I was so choked up with pride I could barely get the words out.

So that was my December 13. All because of you. All because of your generosity. All because you've paying attention to Luke's Christmas story, where Jesus shows up first to those who don't have much.

*O Lord of every path and passageway,
Door and Key and Bridge across the
abyss,
Flashlight in the darkness, blackout's
Candle...*

He is the Lord of every path and passageway. He is the Bridge across the abyss and a flashlight in the darkness. He will deliver us to new worlds of thought, to places where we might be uncomfortable, to places we don't belong, but he will light our path all along the way, and we will fall to our knees in worship, just like those humble shepherds from long ago.

"Luke wanted his congregation to know that Jesus came for them too, in fact came primarily for them."

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Rising Star, our great joy dawning
When the world feels weary and dim.
O Christ, who arrives in Bethlehem,
In an out of the way place which is no place,
For a child to be born, then or now.
Under a star laden sky,
The one who was coming, comes still.

O Lord of every path and passageway,
You do not wait for the world to be ready,
For wars to cease, for the hungry to be feed,
The aching to be healed, the lowly to be lifted up.

Your incarnate love arrives in such a time as this;
When "hungry yawns the abyss"¹, when the
headlines howl,
And nuance conversation is a distant memory.
When creation groans and the forces of the earth
are unleashed,
When people cry out with tired voices,
And our communities become ever more fractured.

There was no better time for love to be born²,
Then that night long ago and tonight.
And so we come to celebrate this stable birth,
We who are returning home from school,
And lives being fashioned in other places.
We who are entering this space with new
wide-eye wonder.
We for whom this place is as familiar as our own
kitchen tables.
We who gather online from around the world.

All of us come to peer into the holy manger,
Allowing an opening for the uncertainties and
doubts that swirl,
Hoping to see that what we've been promised is there,
A Child who changes everything.

And so we ask holy God for you to be our light
that shines in the darkness,
to all who live in the war-torn places, be peace;
to all on the fragile edges, be security;
to all that long for the pain to end, bring comfort;
to all that seek the spark that ignites transformation,
be the source;
to all that ache with loss, draw near;
to all unsure of the road ahead, be the path kindness.

We come to you O God this night,
To steady ourselves against your long arc of peace
and justice.
We come this night to rejoice,
So when we may come to find that still arrives
the star,
And the child most wonderfully there,
As we join our voices in the ancient prayer:
Our Father.... Amen.

¹"Into the Darkest Hour" An Advent/Christmas poem
by Madeline L'Engle

²"The Risk of Christmas," by Madeline L'Engle

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