

## They Made Known

### Nativity 1 (A) 2022 – Christmas Family Eucharist (5:30)

As it does every year, it all comes down to tonight. The lights are up, the trees trimmed, and caked baked, the cookies mixed, the geese fattened, the beeves trimmed, and whatever you got for your loved ones, you got – and whatever they got you, you’ll be getting soon enough. We hope they like it – we hope we like it – but if you don’t get what you want, or couldn’t get for someone you love that thing you really wanted for them, that will have to be okay for now. The stores are closed, even the online ones (I hope), and the time has come to look over there, under the tree or in our case on the piano: behold there a child, laid in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn, or in any other building in this town where no-one was expecting them, and nobody knows their name. You see, these people are not his people, or at least not yet. None here know his mother or his dad, so the holy little family will have to make do with whatever they brought with them or could finagle on the road, and rest this night in a stable far from home.

Yet that will be enough: a cow byre and a donkey’s trough, warm and dry enough to keep them safe, if a bit itchy, and to give his mother a safe place to have her baby and then for all three of them rest a bit after a long journey that neither Mary nor Joseph wanted or needed, but had to take anyway. The people had to be enrolled so that they could be properly taxed, after all, or so thought somebody with the power to make everyone move around, and if it’s a hardship to take some two months off from the carpentry business you’ve worked so hard to build up, don’t worry. I’m sure that the people taking your money will help you out should you come up short.

But if not – well, as the saying goes, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. Mary and Joseph are one flesh now, married in the eyes of God and one another and whatever authority signed off on these things in their day, which is why she had to

ride the donkey with him all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the town and city of David, of whose house and lineage he was. The scriptures would have it so, have these two hoof it from the north of Israel to its south with naught for company but a donkey. It sealed their marriage far more than any cleric's blessing or wedding feast could've done. They were in this together now, fully committed, with a child on the way who would change everything, so long as they made it through, did their part, took such care as they might and loved this child and one another with everything they had. That was the point, after all. That's what Mary signed them up for the moment she said, to the angel, "Let it be..."

In choosing to be mother to the son of God, that is, Mary also chose the man she loved to be that son's father while he was young. Joseph would, if nothing else, show Jesus what it meant to love a woman, to love a child, and to be a man worthy of the name. Your name may be "God delivers," I'm sure Joseph said to him in later years, but never forget who it was delivered you, buster. It sure wasn't any stork, let me tell you, and certainly no angel. You and your heavenly father can chat about that someday, have a good laugh about how you stuck this seventeenth-great grandson of David in the middle of nowhere with dealing with a birth and the afterbirth with nary a soul to help him, but guess what: we did it. Your mother and I, we did it. The upshot of it all is that under my roof you'll be my son, learn what I have to teach you while there's still time. I hope you're paying attention, Jesus, because whatever God has in mind for you, he apparently wanted you to start it from her and with us, so welcome to the world, little one. I promise you'll have more than a manger to sleep in before long.

Mary, in choosing to give life to God's vision and dream, ensured that Joseph would be the model for what this gift would know it meant to be a man. God's intent is to save all people, and to do so by becoming one of them, but he left it to Mary and Joseph to determine exactly how it all would start, and to keep the son of God safe

when he was most vulnerable and helpless. What would it all mean when all was said and done? They didn't know; they couldn't know; they couldn't have borne it had they known, but I'm sure they wondered.

Given all that happened, Mary could not but have had high hopes for this child and for the God to whom she, and she alone, gave flesh and the ability to breathe. Justice he would bring, and mercy, casting down those who lorded it over their fellows, and raising up the lowly over whom they lorded it. He would save his people, she was convinced – and in doing so, save all people. That appears to me to be why she went along with the project in the first place. No matter what else happens in my life, she figured, making and raising this child will be the most important thing I ever do.

Whether she shared all this with the shepherds who came to see the three of them that night, we do not know. It must've been a shock to have had them come wandering in. It's not like it was a common custom, there or elsewhere, for people working out of town at night to come into town in the middle of a work night to visit newborns. Mary and Joseph must've been bewildered, at least at first. Then, once the shepherds told them why they were there, how they knew where to go, and what the angels had sung to them while they were abiding in the fields keeping watch over their flock, they were no doubt amazed. I suspect a chill ran down their spines, as they realized that what had up to now been a secret they shared with one each other and at most with Elizabeth and Zechariah, the one muted by God and the other not given to blabbing, was now common knowledge among common strangers.

They knew it, the shepherds, and now they would make it known: this day has been born for us, in the city of David, a savior, who is Christ the Lord. We have seen it, they told everyone they met on their way back out of town. Our eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord, and you won't believe how: a babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger, because there was no room for them in the

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inn. That is, a child with no home, no crib, barely out of the weather, born to people with nothing to their names but cloth, a donkey, and each other. Angels sang of it from here to Mars, but it's all up to Mary and Joseph now, at least for now.

We don't know how this will work, just that it will work: God saves. Unto us a child is born, a son is given, and his name shall be called...Jesus, God delivers. Because they knew it, and made it known, we know it, too.

May the grace of the Nativity, the Incarnation, be with us all this night before Christmas, and on every day that follows. *Amen.*

## As it Had Been Told

### Nativity 2 (A) 2022 – Christmas Festival Eucharist (8:30)

What a noise they must've made, coming in – and think of the smell. The shepherds, I mean, who had been quietly tending their flocks by night, and hoping the one on watch doesn't nod off and miss the stealthy reaver or the hungry wild dog – and then all heaven broke loose in song. What a noise that must've made as well, the angels singing in their best schoolboy Latin, *Glo-o-o-o-ria in excelsis deo, hosanna in excelsis* and all the rest. Nope, fellas. No-one's getting any sleep tonight, not with that racket – that beautiful, heavenly racket in the starlit sky, an inkling of the noise that the Lord puts up with, day and night, as angels and archangels forever sing their hosannas before the deathless throne. We might as well go to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing. Whatever this is, you can bet it's gonna be good.

Except, perhaps, for the Little Drummer Boy's Neil Peart imitation – “What can I give hm, pa-rum-pa-pa-pum? Give him my drum.” – one can think of nothing an hour's-old child and his exhausted mother need less than a flock of sheep-herders they do not know shuffling in beside them, eager to see what all the angelic fuss is

about. We lost good sleep over this, yet let us not gainsay God when he wants to wake us up and tell us wonderful things. Indeed, one can hardly blame them for doing what angels tell them to do, but it does remind us of how quickly Mary's son becomes woven into – or co-opted by – the stories of everyone else.

You see, it's all well and good for the gospel to bring these living metaphors for ordinary people to the manger to be the first to witness salvation, meek and mild, as it becomes a little child. We're right there with them, just as Luke wants us to be, the first on the scene to witness God's promises to Mary start coming true. Yet these men are a bit of an imposition nonetheless, even if they did manage to change into town-wear and leave the smells of ram and ewe in the hills where they belong. So you've seen the baby, gentlemen – when Mary bore, *pace* when Eve span, who is not a gentleman? – and we trust that he is satisfactory. Any chance you brought a little bread or cheese, some soup or even, dare we say it, some meat for the blessed couple? There was no room for them in the inn, after all, which includes at the dinner table. The angels, who hunger not and feel no emotion except, in their higher ranks, ambition, perhaps failed to mention it amidst their glorias and hosannas, but this newborn savior is as human as you, and so are his parents. Being human means having needs that either you or someone else must address, if we're to have any hope of making it at all. Kings or wise men – and notice how it's never kings who are wise men? – are on their way with solid gold and a bunch of things that at least smell nice, but we don't expect all that, not this soon. Whatever you have will be fine, no doubt. What? Nothing? Oh, dear. Surely you've not shown up in someone's home on Christmas, O shepherds, with naught in your hand but your big wooden staves?

Be that as it may, it all must've gone well. When they left, we are told, they left rejoicing, since they found that all had been as it had been told them it would be. They likely didn't stay that long, certainly not long enough to become a burden, risk transmitting deadly viruses to unvaccinated newborn. They had their flocks to get

back to, after all. Most importantly, they had no intention of adding to Mary's or Joseph's difficulties, so they made sure they didn't. What they did when they left, however, was to tell their fellow human beings as it had been told them. Good news, tidings of great joy, "You know who just got born in the city of David? Christ the Lord! Angels told us of it, and then we went and saw him with our own eyes. It's the real thing, folks. This is it – in our time, on this night, salvation has come. You'll never guess how."

Of course, there was one thing the shepherds had stayed long enough to do when they went to see Mary, Joseph, and the newborn king. They told them why they were there, why they'd darkened the barn doorway (or cave mouth) once that most holy night had become silent again. "It was what the angels said," they said. "We were amazed, and we just had to come and see. It really was just as they said it would be." Why would it not have been? Ah, but you can forgive them for wondering. Yet their trust in what they'd been told was well-placed, and their faith rewarded by sights of joy and, no doubt, welcome. Far from being annoyed by their interruption, suspicious of their motives, or scared of their big sticks and intentions, the blessed couple was, we are told, pleased – and more than pleased. Luke tells us that Mary treasured in her heart the words these rough-hewn shepherds of the country said to her – plain, ordinary folk who had heard, and listened to, the voices of angels, and found that those voices spoke true.

That is: unto us a child is born, a son is given, and his name shall be called...Jesus, God delivers. Because they knew it, and made it known, we know it, too – just as it had been told.

May the grace of that Nativity, the Incarnation, be with us all this night before Christmas, and on every day that follows. *Amen.*