

Star Child

Preached FCCW December 23, 2018 Advent 4C

Luke 1:39-56

Like many of you, lately I have been spending more time in shopping malls than I typically do other times of the year. Since everybody else seems to have been doing the same thing, I have also been spending more time waiting in check-out lines. I'm not complaining though, because it turns out to have been time well spent. It has in fact, made me pause and pay attention to some current events I might otherwise have missed.

Thanks to all the tabloids and entertainment magazines that line the shelves at every cashier's counter, and all the extra time available for me to read them while waiting in long lines, I can say with confidence that I am now up to date on all the latest celebrities and otherwise important people who are expecting babies. Practically every magazine cover I saw featured expectant A-List mothers, from Amy Schumer to Meghan Markle.

From the initial detection of a "baby bump" on a celebrity mother to be – to the first public baby pictures, these prenatal VIPs become the centers of media circuses and objects of intense public scrutiny, before they are even born. There's a special term for these high-profile pregnancies – "conspicuous births." Conspicuous, because they involve conspicuous families, who are accustomed to living in the lime-light.

Maybe it's the time of year - when the world celebrates the birth of Jesus - that leads me to marvel at what an *"inconspicuous birth"* that was. And what an inconspicuous family Mary and Joseph made.

You're probably asking yourselves, "what was so inconspicuous about the birth of Jesus? After all, we are here 2000 years later talking about it. And tomorrow night we will be celebrating it in the middle of the night."

Yet, on the night of the nativity, most of the world slept through the whole event. There was no red-carpet reception in Bethlehem for Mary and Joseph. There was not even a decent room available for them.

There *were* angels scouring the countryside, handing out invitations and directions to the manger. But who did they deliver them to? Some shepherds? Let me tell you, we are used to shepherds being leading actors in our Christmas pageants, but at the time they would have been more like nameless movie extras hired off the street, than bona fide celebrities. Shepherds lived on the margins of society, unnoticed and unwelcome among the religious and social elites.

Luke's gospel tells us that after they visited the holy family, they returned to their fields glorifying and praising God for all they had seen. But I doubt that there were many of the "beautiful people" in those neighborhoods to hear what they had to say.

Yes, there *was* a cameo appearance by some wise dignitaries, star gazers from the East, who showed up eventually. But when they stopped at the palace of King Herod to ask for directions to the address of the child who was born “King of the Jews,” those in the upper echelons of Jerusalem society were caught off guard - surprised to hear that such a birth had taken place at all!

If anything, what is conspicuous about the nativity is what was missing. There was no mid-wife to ensure a safe delivery. No family gathered about to witness the joyous event. Not even a proper cradle in which to lay the new-born king. What made the birth of Jesus conspicuous was not the way it captured world’s imagination at the time. It was what it revealed about God's imagination for humanity, from the beginning of time.

In a world starstruck by the unapproachable lifestyles of the rich and famous, where people find themselves yearning to be universally loved and admired as they are, craving the privilege and ease they enjoy, God has revealed to common folks like us something far more valuable than the wealth and fame by which we mistakenly measure our significance.

God showed that we are loved not for our beauty, talent or prestige. We are loved for who we are. We don’t have to scale social ladders, because in Jesus, God has come down to our level. Christmas proclaims that life is not a talent show or a popularity contest. Life’s fulfillment is not found in emulating someone else, but in making a place for the God who was willing to become like you and me. God is with *us* – that newborn baby is God with us.

There is a poem that names what was so significant about the birth of Jesus. It is "Carol of the Epiphany" written by John Bell.

***I sought him dressed in finest clothes,
where money talks and status grows;
but power and wealth he never chose:
it seemed he lived in poverty.***

***I sought him in the safest place,
remote from crime or cheap disgrace;
but safety never knew his face:
it seemed he lived in jeopardy.***

***I sought him where the spotlights glare,
where crowds collect and critics stare;
but no one knew his presence there:
it seemed he lived in obscurity.***

*Then, in the streets, we heard the word
which seemed, for all the world, absurd:
that those who could no gifts afford
were entertaining Christ the Lord.*

*And so, distinct from all we'd planned,
among the poorest of the land,
we did what few might understand:
We touched God in a baby's hand.*

I doubt anybody here in this church will ever make the cover of People magazine or be named Time's Person of the Year. We will leave here on Christmas Eve, continuing to live our noticeably inconspicuous lives; as far from the limelight as were those shepherds in the Bethlehem hills, and as anonymous as those two desperate, peasant parents in a stable. But we know the amazing truth about the most conspicuous birth of all. For the child born to an ordinary family is Emmanuel – God with us.

When we gather back here on Christmas Eve, our celebration of this conspicuous birth will not be held under blinding marquees announcing his arrival, but with faces aglow in the flickering light of tiny candles held in the hand of each ordinary worshipper.

In this season of Advent and Christmas we are reminded that it is in inconspicuous lives like ours that God chose to make a home. That the invitation given by angels and shepherds was also addressed to you and me. That he is reborn in *each one of us*, over and over again as we welcome him and make room for him in *our lives*.

And as we go forth from here, we go as bearers of news that doesn't make the covers of magazines or newspaper headlines, but that *is delivered* through lives that are changed by the birth of this star child.

In the sharing of that news, through the telling we do and the living of our lives, *we* become living invitations to others, to come to the manger for *themselves*; to see with *their own eyes*, and to experience in *their own hearts*, this thing that the Lord has made known to us.

And to touch God for themselves, in a baby's hand.

