

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*      *July 25, 2021*

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## Neither Sanitized Nor Safe

Luke 2:1-20      9th Sunday after Pentecost

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I feel as though we often do something of a disservice to Christmas. We tend to sanitize it a bit too much. We want it to be all neat and tidy. But when has the birth of a child ever been neat and tidy? And frankly, we tend to try to do the same with God as well. We try to make God neat and tidy...safe even. But I don't think God is neat and tidy, and I certainly don't think God is safe! At least not in the most common understanding of that word.

Think of the Christmas cards you got seven months ago or so. I bet a fair number of them had a beautiful nativity scene on them. Perhaps they had a serene looking Mary staring down at a peaceful baby Jesus. Maybe there were shepherds in the background looking spick and span. Joseph is likely off in the corner somewhere looking contemplative. And the magi, they always look so regal, don't they?

None of that is realistic though, is it? Human reality is never that neat and tidy. Mary must have been a sweaty, rumped mess. Joseph was likely dwelling on the strange events that had occurred in the last year, perhaps struggling with doubts, I know I would have been! The shepherds would have been pretty dirty if they came in from the fields and the magi had likely been travelling for months! Not much neat and tidy in **that** scene!

I know this image of the birth of our savior isn't as pleasant as the more common, "hallmark" version. But this, more realistic take, reassures me far more than the neat and tidy version! The gift of Emmanuel, the wonderful, powerful event of the incarnation is made all the more meaningful because it was grounded in human reality. Broken, dirty, limited, human reality. God, amazing, immaculate, all-powerful and all-knowing God; takes on human flesh and blood in every sense of those words. Born of a human mother,

laid to rest in a feeding trough, with outcasts and strangers to herald his birth. This narrative is full of messy humanity, and there's God, a human baby, smack dab in the middle of it!

We sanitize the birth narrative because we want God to be special, holy, and different; somehow apart from the messiness of human reality. But if that were what God wanted then Jesus would have descended directly from heaven, perfect and immaculate. Perhaps wafting gently on a moonbeam, down into Mary's waiting arms. But no, God chooses to take on humanity fully. God chooses limitation, brokenness, blood, sweat, tears, and dirt. God meets us where we are!

Not only do we often try to sanitize God, but as I said before, we often try to tame or domesticate God too. We want to make God safe. But God is not safe! However, God is good! But there's a difference between safe and good, isn't there? There's a scene from "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe" by C.S. Lewis that makes this point beautifully. In the scene Mr. Beaver is telling the children about the great lion and Christ figure, Aslan:

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly." "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."<sup>1</sup>

God is not safe, but God is, indeed, good. The birth narrative makes this point as well, though it might not be as obvious as the dirtiness and messiness evident in the text. You see, the author of Luke goes out of his way to setup the major conflict of the entire Gospel within these first few chapters.

Each of the first three chapters of Luke mentions a powerful figure: King Herod of Judea is mentioned in Luke 1:5<sup>2</sup>, Emperor Augustus is mentioned in Luke 2:1 (and by the way, one of his other titles was "Prince of Peace"), Governor Quirinius is mentioned in Luke 2:2, and then in Luke 3:1 we hear

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis and Pauline Baynes, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (HarperCollins, 1994), pp. 79-80.

<sup>2</sup> All Scriptural references are to the NRSV

about Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, the petty Kings Herod, Phillip, and Lysanias, and in the next verse the high priests Annas and Caiaphas.

Now these references certainly provide us with historical context, but they do more than that, they also emphasize the difference between human rulers and God. This talk of Emperors, Governors, Kings, and High Priests is all in direct contrast to the birth of the greatest King and true prince of peace, Jesus. All these mentions of powerful men with important titles who lived in palaces in important places; and in contrast Christ is born in a tiny village in a backwater province of the Roman Empire to a pair of total nobodies. And he will go on to challenge those powerful men and the systems they have imposed on the world.

God is not safe. Jesus is not safe. Jesus came, in part, to challenge us. Challenge our systems of power and justice. Overturn the world's priorities. Luke emphasizes this again in these same chapters. Mary sings, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly."<sup>3</sup> Simeon warns Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed."<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer exhorts the people coming out to be baptized to live in just and ethical ways.<sup>5</sup>

And it's not just Luke that demonstrates the conflict between divine power and human power. The prologue of the Gospel of John makes this clear as well, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."<sup>6</sup> We're not good at seeing Jesus, and that is at least in part because we want Jesus to be safe and sanitized; not some counter-establishment rabble rouser. But Jesus **is** counter-establishment, at least he is counter-systems of power that oppress and enslave people. And let's face it, that describes most human systems of power, and many aspects of our systems of justice as well.

God is neither safe nor sanitized. We would do well to remember that. We would also do well to remember what Mr. Beaver tells the children. While God is not safe or tame, God is **good**. And God wants us to be good too.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:52 (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> Luke 2:34b

<sup>5</sup> Luke 3:10-14

<sup>6</sup> John 1:10-11

God wants our systems to be good and just and merciful. God wants us to seek after relationship and community, not power and influence over others. God wants us to pay attention to the margins of our reality, to the small villages and unimportant people. God wants us to get out of our comfort zones, out of our safe spaces, and do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our Incarnated God, Jesus Christ, who shows us the way of goodness and love.

This is the beautiful promise of the incarnation. God enters, fully, into the mess and dirt of human reality. And God does so with purpose. Salvation, yes. But also goodness, love, and blessing. God in Christ is showing us a new way of living and being. A new way of loving and being in community. A new way of goodness and light. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it,"<sup>7</sup> the Gospel of John tells us. Whether that darkness is human sin and brokenness, corrupt systems of power and justice, or the forces of evil at work in the world; God is good and God's goodness overcomes all.

So let's remember what's truly important about the birth of Christ. While the warm fuzzies of "hallmark" Christmas cards are nice, they are not real. And the birth of Christ, the great triumph of wholeness over brokenness and light over darkness, is real. While we might want God to be safe and tame, God is not. And life and teachings of Christ defy our attempts to hold onto our comfort and safety. Christ's actions and teachings are at times messy and surprising, as well as topsy-turvy and challenging, but always good. Not always safe or tame, and certainly in opposition to injustice and oppression, but always good. Amen.

- Pastor Jon Nelson

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<sup>7</sup> John 1:5