**Walking to Bethlehem** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Christmas Eve The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Luke 2:1-20 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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You know, one of the things I like best about Christmas Eve worship services is the opportunity to meet visiting family members and friends from near and far. In fact, one of the first questions we ask when we meet someone is, *“Where are you from?”* Some people *perk up* and others *wince* when asked that question.

The idea of *place* and the *names* of *particular places* on a map hold power over us.

This may be why I found myself getting a bit *misty-eyed* during a scene from, *“Carol of the Bells,”* the *Ted Lasso* Christmas episode (Season 2, Episode 4).

Let’s set the scene: *Leslie Higgins,* the quirky and lovable executive for AFC Richmond, and his family had a tradition of inviting players who didn’t have a place to go over for Christmas dinner. Usually, the invitation attracts, at most, two players.

This particular year, however, *the entire team* showed up, requiring a creative extension of the dinner table. The storyline itself stands out as a celebration of *friendship and joy.*

In the episode*,* Higgins rises to give a holiday toast to all the guests. After honoring his wife and kids, he recognizes *everyone* at the table.

Instead of using a vague *‘everyone here,’* he methodically and deliberately names the places they are from:

*“To you and all your families in Lagos, Guadalajara, Groningen, Cordon, Montreal, Benin City, Harare, Kingston, and Santa Cruz de la Sierra… I know you would have all preferred to have been with them, but it was truly an honor to have you share our traditions and help make a few new ones.”*

These are international athletes in a global sport where the most loyal fans know the countries where they are from. It would have been easy and likely well-received for Higgins to name Nigeria, Mexico, the Netherlands, etc., in his litany.

But he didn’t settle for the *somewhat* specific. He narrowed the scope. And as the camera panned to each player representing each place, [*their faces lit up as if they were receiving a sacred, individualized blessing*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIOwnPzU-_U)*.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

I share this with you because the question, *“Where are you from?”* was important to the family of Jesus, as well.

We’re told, for example, in Luke 2 about *the politics* requiring Joseph to register in his *hometown*, [they likely walked the 90 or so miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem—the depiction Mary riding on a donkey comes from the world of art, not from the text], about the shepherds keeping watch, and about heavenly hosts of angels celebrating [it’s a theological story obviously written by men, for men!], but we hear *nothing* of the blood, the nakedness, the primal groans, the fear, the strength and power of the human body, the first-time shrieks of new life bursting into the world….

Perhaps this is where we received our first *antiseptic views* of holiness, from a sterilized *story of incarnation* far removed from its reality. We’ve come to understand the concept of holiness as *uncontaminated* from the realities of the world, *but [ask yourselves] is this truly the story of divinity? The story of God entering into our grief, our sorrows, our joys?*

Like so many renderings of the narratives in Scripture, the birth of Jesus has been *domesticated and dulled* to make it more palatable. But there’s something subversively *fleshly and carnal* about Mary birthing God and her role as an active agent in the messy, material, and imminent.[[2]](#footnote-2)

And this is true, today, as well. Did you know that Christmas has been cancelled in Bethlehem this year because of the ongoing fighting in nearby Gaza?

Speaking of the cancellation of Christmas, the Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem [[said in an interview with NPR](https://urldefense.com/v3/__https%3A/www.npr.org/2023/12/16/1219245873/bethlehem-christmas-gaza-israel__;!!PIZeeW5wscynRQ!uCpEcsg-HaYK9it_H2IA6NGMRTNdyoa34L3be9cZa4WEU0ctBtKuVQEOKHh57hF-fawSGnzcNBvhKGJDP1NFqc2n3KTn$)]: *“I always say we need to de-romanticize Christmas. In reality, it’s a story of a baby who was born in the most difficult circumstances and the Roman Empire under occupation, who survived the massacre of children himself when he was born. So the connection [is] natural to us.”*

This matters because a broken, refugee, brown, female, naked, stretched, hormonal, marginalized body is how divinity entered this world and where divinity still makes itself most known today….

The nativity scene, like much of Western theology, is far removed from the *very bloody* and *very raw* and *very human* process of birth—and the sometimes difficult realities of life.

But these are the kinds of things that make up our faith: *the naked, the primal, even the offensive.* And while Mary’s story turned out the way she’d hope it would—with a newborn child in her arms—*not all stories turn out that way.* What the nativity scene (as we’re used to seeing it) *fails* to show us is that our faith is made of that too: *the sadness, the questions, the longing, the despair, the anger.* Encompassed within the birth of Jesus is the deeply difficult and deeply beautiful, the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the material. Like our lives, it was fleshly and carnal—and it was also holy.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I want you to think about this in terms of how we in the West have come to understand the incarnation.

You see, in the first *1200 years* of Christianity, the central feast or celebration was *Easter,* with the high holy days of Holy Week leading up to the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. But in the *thirteenth century*, *Francis of Assisi* entered the scene. [Francis is depicted by the way in the stained glass window to my right (your left), in the left side panel]. He *intuited* that we didn’t need to wait for God to love us through the cross and resurrection. Francis believed the whole thing started with *incarnate love.* He popularized what we now take for granted as Christmas, which for many became *the* major Christian feast. *Christmas is the Feast of the Incarnation* when we celebrate God taking human form in the birth of Jesus.

Francis realized that since God had become flesh—*taken on materiality, physicality, humanity*—then we didn’t have to wait for Good Friday and Easter to “solve the problem” of human sin: the problem was solved from the beginning. It makes sense that Christmas became the great celebratory feast of Christians because it basically says that *it’s good to be human, it’s good to be on this Earth, it’s good to have a body, it’s good to have emotions. We don’t need to be ashamed of any of it! God loves matter and physicality.*

With that insight, it’s no wonder Francis went wild over Christmas. Francis believed that trees should be decorated with lights to show their true status as God’s creations, and that’s exactly what we still do eight hundred years later.

According to Franciscan Richard Rohr, *“The early Eastern Church, which too few people in the United States and Western Europe are familiar with, made it very clear that* the Incarnation of Christ manifests a universal principle. *Incarnation meant not just that God became Jesus, but that God said yes to the material universe and physicality itself. Eastern Christianity understands the mystery of incarnation in the universal sense. So it is always Advent because God is forever coming into the world”* (see John 1:9).[[4]](#footnote-4)

The hymn writer, Brian Wren, is one of the church’s most gifted musicians. Here are some words he wrote about the incarnation that may surprise you; the hymn is titled, *Good is the Flesh,* and to prepare to hear these words, take a moment to relax, take a deep breath, close your eyes if you want, forget the long list of things yet undone to get ready for Christmas, and consider the inherent truth and beauty of these words:

***Good*** *is the flesh that the Word has become,****good*** *is the birthing, the milk in the breast,****good*** *is the feeding, caressing and rest,****good*** *is the body for knowing the world,****Good*** *is the flesh that the Word has become.*

***Good*** *is the body for knowing the world,
       sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,
      feeling, perceiving, within and around,****good*** *is the body, from cradle to grave,****Good*** *is the flesh that the Word has become.*

***Good*** *is the body, from cradle to grave,
      growing and ageing, arousing, impaired,
      happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,****good*** *is the pleasure of God in our flesh.****Good*** *is the flesh that the Word has become.*

***Good*** *is the pleasure of God in our flesh,
      longing in all, as in Jesus, to dwell,
      glad of embracing, and tasting, and smell,****good*** *is the body, for* ***good*** *and for God,****Good*** *is the flesh that the Word has become.*

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, *An Altar in the World, said: “I do not recall ever being told in church that my flesh is good, or that God takes pleasure in it. Yet this is the central claim of the incarnation—that God trusted flesh and blood to bring divine love to earth.”*

So, with this in mind, let’s review the highlights of the earthy, fleshy birth of Jesus from Luke 2: Caesar Augustus, Quirinius, Syria, Nazareth, Galilee, Judea, Bethlehem, David, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus; conflict: Roman occupation, no room at the inn; and introspection: *“But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them,”* and enough hope to keep us interested in what the baby Jesus means for us: *“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all the people.”*

Friends, God coming to the world as a baby is a cause for *celebration.*  But hearing that God arrived as Jesus, son of Mary, in a manger in Bethlehem, a backwater town that was then, as it is now, under brutal occupation, and the first recipients of this news were marginalized *“essential workers”* in a field at night– this is a reason to sing.

God, you see, came to the heart of Bethlehem so that God could get to the heart of *all* the cities and towns in the world.

And so, whatever place on the map you *came from*, and whichever one you occupy *now,* may the *hope, peace, joy, and love* of Jesus of Nazareth find you during the Christmas season.[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. Craig Nash, *The Heart of Bethlehem is the Heart of the World*, Good Faith Media, December 21, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Rohr, *A Human and Holy Birth,* Daily Meditation (Incarnation), December 19, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kat Armas, Sacred Belonging: A 40-Day Devotional on the Liberating Heart of Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2023), 154, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Richard Rohr, *Celebrating Incarnation,* Daily Meditation, December 17, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Craig Nash, *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)