

‘Glory to God in the Deepest!’

Sermon Luke 2: 8-20

Christmas Eve

December 24th, 2024

The first congregation I served as a pastor was a small Lutheran church in San Jose, California, in the heart of Silicon Valley. Right around the corner from my congregation was one of those mega churches, a church that probably drew hundreds of worshipers on any given Sunday. Everything about this church was BIG.

I remember driving by this big church on my way to work as the Advent season started. And it had a big banner up front that said: Christmas spectacular! Live nativity! Music! Shows! Celebrate our Savior’s birth with us!

I have to admit: my first reaction was envy – I was jealous! My little church would never be able to put on something like that, not even remotely. We’d never draw the same crowds. We just wouldn’t be able to compete. Which stung a little, because we live in a society in which it’s all about the numbers game.

But then I thought: Would I really want this? Christmas spectacular?

I mean, Christmas in this country is quite spectacular to begin with, isn’t it? We barely make it through Thanksgiving, and it begins: elaborate decorations in malls and stores. Holiday songs blasting everywhere. Concerts and shows galore. Holiday parties all the time. Glitz and glamour and tinsel – and all the glitter that tends to revisit us again and again like the ghost of Christmas past.

There are Christmas specials on TV - classic holiday movies, and the quite formulaic Christmas movies on the Hallmark Channel. We are bombarded with commercials enticing us to buy elaborate gifts – jewelry, a car, the latest gaming system – because this is the best way to tell someone we love them and really care about them. I don’t know about you, but I find this rather exhausting.

And folks like to party big as well. Why would Christmas be an exception? Hey, Christ, the Savior, is born! Let’s have a birthday bash! Christmas spectacular!

Now don’t get me wrong: Christmas is a wonderful time of the year. There is plenty of reason to be joyful and to celebrate. God becomes human. God enters this world to be among us and with us. Through this child in the manger, God shows us

that new beginnings are possible – and that life will always have the last word, even under adverse circumstances.

But if you think about it, God came into this world in a rather unspectacular way. Not as a big warrior, or a mighty and powerful ruler, but a little child. Born to a young couple on the road, with no real roof over their heads. Born away from human hustle and bustle, among animals.

There is no team of paparazzi waiting, like with any of the royal babies in Britain. Jesus' birth is no breaking news, there is no viral sharing on social media about it. The public – most of the world for that matter – is unaware what happens there on the outskirts of Bethlehem, this tiny and insignificant town in Judea.

The only thing that is remotely spectacular that night is the appearance of an angel and the heavenly host. However, it is a strange crowd that gets to witness this heavenly display: shepherds in the fields, and, let me tell you, in those days shepherds were the lowest of the low, social outcasts. Many a man who had gotten into trouble with the authorities would go underground as a shepherd and disappear for a while, watching the flocks of some rich man far away from society. Just like today, those rich folks didn't ask many questions, knowing they could treat and pay such outcasts poorly. Shepherds were people any respectable person wouldn't mingle with.

Isn't it strange that **God** chooses to mingle with them on that holy night? Isn't it strange that they get to see and hear the amazing news of the birth of one who is to redeem all the world first – that they are chosen to see the Savior of all before anyone else?

God is sending a message here, a message that we hear in the jubilant song of the heavenly host: 'Glory to God in the highest heavens and peace on earth among those whom God favors'. Among those whom God favors. And whom does God favor? The ones at the bottom of society. Said Shepherds. Mary, an ordinary young woman. Joseph, a carpenter from the Galilean backwater of Nazareth. Glory is to God in the highest as it is in the deepest and among the lowest.

God favors unspectacular people. People who are despised. People who don't have it easy. People who don't have a voice, people who have to do as the Emperor says, even if it means traveling for several days on foot with a woman who is about to give birth. People who know what oppression means. People who are

underprivileged, who are treated unfairly. People who long for change, people who long for God to come and turn the world on its head.

God is sending a message by being born as one of them, by becoming one of them – ridiculed by the authorities, derided, despised, abused, and killed like a criminal on the cross.

Jesus' life wasn't spectacular. If it hadn't been for those who told his story and who wrote it down eventually, his life would have been but a footnote in the history books.

Even Jesus' message was and is rather unspectacular. At its core is love – love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. And, as we all know, love is mostly experienced in the small and unspectacular moments and situations of our lives. It's the little, yet relentless gestures, it is commitment that make a real difference. Through the rather unspectacular, the world is changed, little by little.

This is the miracle of Christ's birth – that God can take the unspectacular, the insignificant, the ordinary, and make it into something that's extraordinary.

Christmas is not over once we leave this place, once the turkey is eaten, once the presents are opened, once the celebrations stop, once our trees are kicked to the curb, once we return to the ordinary and unspectacular days of our lives. For we have been given a gift, the gift of this child in the manger, the gift of a new beginning, the gift of hope, the gift of love. It's a multi-layered gift, a gift that keeps on giving, a gift we are invited to unwrap each and every day – a gift we have been given to use, every day, not in a spectacular fashion, but in small, yet profound ways.

And as we use this gift, the light of this holy day continues to shine – shine in the darkness of our times, and shine into this world. Amen