

Gravity & Grace—Nativity of Our Lord

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[Isaiah 9:2-7](#)

[Luke 2:1-20](#)

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

(In this sermon I draw on the concept of [Gravity and Grace](#) in the work of [Simone Weil](#).)

In Luke's Gospel this evening—as Mary's pregnancy comes to term—we heard that the ancient wheels of political power were turning. Luke's Gospel is known as the most elegant and polished—perhaps meant for an elite and educated audience. And so, it is fitting that Luke begins with power and people-movers. Luke begins with a decree from the Roman Emperor, the most powerful man on earth.

From Augustus, emperor: the whole world was to be counted! And to the appointed Roman governor of Syria—Quirinius—an order: Roman subjects there were to be counted as well: all for the purposes of taxation and conscription of soldiers. And we, in our time of COVID, are very aware of the urgency and confusion when navigating mandates and orders, even logical and just orders, that require moving lots of people around... or telling lots of people to stay in place.

There was no pregnancy exemption for this census in Luke. And Joseph hit the road with his very pregnant, not-yet-wife Mary. We find Joseph and Mary on their way when God comes—they were tripped up.

As we, so often, are tripped up. Tripping and falling from jam-packed schedules, work or family drama. Dragged down, again and again, in quarantine, closures, hospitals and airports. Stuck in all the kinds of waiting rooms, so-to-speak, that our lives present. However, as Luke tells it... God's coming is not diverted by the powerful decrees of this world. God's coming, God's calling—Gracefully rises through.

The shepherds too tonight, we heard, had their noses down and kept their watch. Shepherds are, of course, a favorite image of the people of Israel, of God. King David of old, as you might remember, was the youngest brother, the small one, whom no one thought worthy of being present when the king-making prophet came to call at his father's house. Where was David? He was out in the fields watching the flocks.

Just so, *this* night, the shepherds were out. And through the heaviness of the dark sky, through the Gravity of obligation and work—there appears God's messenger, and with them the very glory of God. Luke has woven a clever and subversive trick into his Gospel meant for his fancy audience: Though we started with the authority and prestige of an emperor, now we have sunk down to the dusty fields, with laborers whose work finds them outside with their animals, but awake.

And it is, to our surprise, to these small ones, so close to the earth, whom the world thinks just as unimportant as young, little David—or as unimportant an unwed mother, delivering a child out of doors—to these small ones the message comes—to *them* Grace comes.

As they are pressed down in their lives of labor and powerlessness, God comes, in true glory and majesty. To them the empowering message comes. To people, caught up in their lives, doing their dirty work—that is, to you, to those who work, who worry, to those who are under the Gravity of the world, comes the Word: “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

And instead of the glory and majesty and multitude of God's power revealed in an ancient temple of huge stones and golden utensils—it is here, in the fields, that a glimpse of the infinite joy of God bursts out. The Gravity and gravitas of the world does not keep God down, nor does it keep God up! “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on *earth* peace among those whom God favors!” And *there* is another stroke of the Gospel writer Luke against the counterfeit authority of Rome, against all who would place themselves higher than others. We—*you*—are the ones whom God favors, the angels say.

But this is so hard to believe, day to day. And I think that is so, because you could say there are two forces at play in our existence. Gravity is one: the downward, crushing force of living—stress, loss, power. Nothing, it would seem, can ever escape the Gravity of the “emperor's decree” or simply the law of the belly that requires us all to work, to labor in order to live and feed our families. Gravity.

But, as we have seen in Luke's story of Christ's birth there is another, radically free force—as the Church, we call this Grace. Christ is born in poverty, in placelessness, while travelling because of a Roman order, perhaps all to show how God's mercy and glory, God's Grace, rises right through all this Gravity. And Grace is what calls shepherds, calls them through their simple work to be the real heralds of the coming of God.

When the shepherds hear and understand this Grace, *they go!* They go freely and they minister to the new parents, and all who are with them. Luke writes: “They went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known

what had been told them about *this* child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.”

Now the *shepherds* have become bearers of amazing news. By the joy of Grace taking shape in them, shepherds are filled and lifted, out of the dust of their social caste—and they themselves have become messengers, angels, of God. They serve Mary with news that confirms what she has already heard herself from God's messenger. The shepherds serve Joseph and all the house of David, confirming both the prophecy of Isaiah maybe running through his mind and all that Mary has told him about her experiences.

This is the pattern that God has called us to follow. Gravity will remain. Busy-ness will remain. Illness, pain, selfishness—sadly—will remain. **But God never was, nor ever will be, stopped by this Gravity.** And just so: God's Grace has freed us, pulled us through the immeasurable stones and weights of life. And God will continue to call and herald to us this good news—that *you and all people—all of creation*—are the ones whom God favors.

I don't know when the call will come to each of you, when Christ will be born *in you*—the timing is hidden. Just as Mary's timing was uncertain, and the meeting of shepherds and angels was unexpected. But when the time comes you will know, because the message is, “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid and go, minister now to those in your life who need you. Bring the message of Grace, the freeness of Grace.

Or maybe, and I think this is the case for many of you, Christ has already come to you. You are already holding the message! The experience of Grace has already been delivered to you.

And now, *now* is the time in our culture of brokenness and grief to tell the story. Now is the time to go with haste to “Bethlehem” and find the Joseph and Mary in *your* life, to find those waiting for confirmation, waiting beneath and between Gravity. Now is the time to tell them, to show them, that Grace has come.

Amen.