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St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Newton, MA  
Luke 2:1-21  
24 December 2024

What moved you to come here tonight?

Have you or your family attended Christmas Eve services here for a long time, and you can't imagine being anywhere else?

Were you not sure where to go and decided to take a chance and come here, despite the highly questionable parking situation?

Did a loved one drag you here?

Did you come for the vibe, for the ambience, to enjoy the beautiful decorations in this historic New England Church and to sing carols?

What moved you to come here tonight?

People are moving in all kinds of ways, for all kinds of reasons in the Gospel of Luke which we hear read aloud each and every Christmas. The passage starts off with an involuntary mass movement of the people throughout the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire did hold these registrations periodically to levy taxes and to draft men into the military. Emperor Augustus, a huge player on the world stage at the time, has the power to make people drop everything they're doing and return to their hometown.

Imagine taking unpaid time off of work, at a time you don't get to choose, to go somewhere you might not want to go, to do something you don't want to do. And we aren't talking about a day trip or an overnight here. Though Israel is a smaller country, it seems much bigger if you have to travel by foot. The 80 mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem likely took about a week, particularly for someone in the last part of the last trimester of pregnancy. This forced march, the obligatory movement of registration, AKA the super boring part of this passage underscores the power, the omnipresence, the tyranny of the global superpower that was Rome.

The story then shifts to show us how this huge public, political, temporary, impersonal mass migration quickly becomes personal private, familial through the experience of an

engaged couple: Joseph and Mary. This registration is effectively a highly inconvenient, ill advised baby moon, Mary was quite likely in the first stage of labor in the last days of the trip, particularly since this was her first child. So as they go towards Bethlehem, Jesus too is beginning his own journey out into the world. Here comes baby, ready or not, since biology just does not give a hoot about the foibles of humans.

In addition to the requisite registration, in addition to the baby on the move to be born, there is also an unspoken lack of movement whispering just below the surface. If Joseph is from Bethlehem, if Bethlehem is his hometown, where is his family? Why don't Mary and Joseph stay with them? Why are they being left to fend for themselves? What is happening?

We might surmise that Mary's brave choice to say yes to the angel Gabriel, the very choice for which she is revered for today, most likely resulted in people moving away from them, leaving her and Joseph to face the very real dangers of childbirth without the physical and emotional support she would have needed.

Our story next moves to the shepherds. The shepherds are on the outskirts, literally and metaphorically. They are outside of the town of Bethlehem and they also exist—subsist, really—on the outskirts of the social hierarchy. Shepherds are next to nobodies. These shepherds, whose names we never find out, serve as a foil, the polar opposite of the influence and rank, the power, privilege, and prestige of Emperor Augustus and Governor Quirinus.

The first thing the angel says is, "Do not be afraid." Now angels like to say that in Scripture. And also note how "do not be afraid" is in direct contradiction to Rome's way of being Rome says jump. The response is supposed to be how high. That opening, familiar phrase, "Do not be afraid" from a messenger of God signals how differently God is moves when compared to the earthly powers that be.

The angel then speaks of good news of great joy for all people, not for just some, but for ALL. This inclusive, broad statement would have been meaningful for the shepherds. These shepherds are being so heavily taxed they can barely afford to feed their families. After the

heavenly host appears and sings, after these awe inspiring events, the shepherds turn to one another, and they say, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

The shepherds voluntarily choose to go and look for Jesus. They are not forced. God does not compel them. They are not little marionettes on puppet strings. Rome says, "Go over there. Pay this. Don't do that. Be afraid. Be very afraid." Not so with God. The shepherds go because they want to, not because they must or else. God invites. Rome manhandles.

The Roman Empire was an absolutely terrifying place to live for a vast majority of people. And if God wanted to pick a good time and place to be born, this was 100 percent not it.

Now we might not be moving involuntarily for a census. But there are certainly forces that shape our movements all the time. We too know about living with and being subject to forces beyond our control. Our **country** is more divided than it's been in a long time, unable to agree on basic facts unwilling to imagine each other's real. Our **weather** is increasingly erratic and unpredictable, with hurricanes, for example, decimating places that were traditionally thought of as beyond the reach of hurricanes. Our **healthcare** system has had serious issues for a long time, and the cracks are getting harder and harder to hide. Our **technology** that was so critical during the height of the pandemic in allowing us to stay at least somewhat connected to family and friends is also horrible in that we know about all the world's heartaches in a way that would have been nearly impossible not that long ago; and, y'all, we have not evolved to process all the world's troubles.

Beloveds. This is all hard. And this is all real.

And, AND, we do have a legacy of strength, should we choose to tap into it.

We stand in a long line of people who have needed, wanted, and found God, even when, or maybe especially when, being jostled about by the changes and chances of this life. We are in a line with King David, who first offered to build the temple in Jerusalem for God. What if young David had said, "I'm a shepherd. I'm not fighting that Goliath guy. I am also spontaneous and overconfident in ways that are not always helpful so no thank you." But David was moved to lead, though he was definitely not perfect.

We are in a line with Harriet Tubman, who after freeing herself, upped the ante and freed hundreds of others, too. What if Harriet Tubman had said, “I can’t bring all people who are enslaved to freedom, so I’m just going to wait until they are freed.” But Harriet was moved to lead 300 people to freedom. That was 0.075% of the enslaved population in the 1860—less than 1%. Made a gargantuan difference to each and every one of the 300 people, though.

We are in a line with Charles Dickens, who wrote *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and more bringing the crusty side of the British Industrial Revolution particularly with regards to children, to a wide audience. What if Charles Dickens had said, “I will use my talent for description to write about something more happy.” But Dickens was moved to talk about what he was seeing, what he experienced, and his work is thought to have led indirectly to child labor laws.

We are in a line with Mary who bravely said, “Let it be according to your word,” at great personal cost to herself, a cost so unspeakable that is not spelled out for us in the Scripture. We revere her now. What if Mary had said, “It’s not a good time.” Mary was moved to violate social norms to follow God. We revere her for it now. There is absolutely no way that is how she was viewed then.

We are in line with the shepherds, who dared to believe that this joyful announcement was meant for them, too, that it wasn’t misdelivered, that it wasn’t a mistake, that they weren’t dreaming. What if the shepherds had said, “Nah. Choosing to leave these sheep, our livelihood, is the world’s dumbest move. Besides, the angels were not specific enough about where exactly this baby will be so we will just stay put.” But the shepherds did go, of their own volition, and due in part to their witness, we are sitting here tonight.

Life was scary and hard for King David, for Harriet Tubman, for Charles Dickens, for Mary, for the shepherds, though in different ways. They had all kinds of reasons to shut down. And they all still let themselves be moved, each of them. They all dared to believe there is something beyond the cesspool, the dumpster fire, something that is worth the sacrifice.

They all leaned towards a more wonderful reality beyond what they could see, sometimes on a smaller, individual scale, sometimes on a much wider, social scale, despite the odds against them, odds which only seemed surmountable in retrospect. There are still signs and symbols meant to move us, if we so choose. There is still beauty, and hope, and joy, and love here tonight and elsewhere—close by, at home, in nature. It's both the heavenly host and a baby. A baby! Everyone sitting here tonight was a baby. So ordinary and yet how extraordinary.

Whether it's the northern lights, perhaps even from Hamilton Field, a spouse's or partner's tears during your wedding vows, a big hug from a loved one. Cuddling with a cat or dog. An absolutely gorgeous sky, the sun mostly but definitely not totally concealed, reflecting off the clouds in a way that creates a kaleidoscope of pink, purple, orange, blue, grey, and white, so much so that you tear up in wonder and awe.

So much can move us, if we let it, to awe, to hope, away from complete despair, away from paralysis, towards something bigger than ourselves.

So whatever or whoever moved you to come here tonight—it doesn't really matter. Just consider letting God move you if not tonight than some other time.

Let yourself be moved to hope.

Let yourself be moved to joy.

Let yourself be moved to action.

Let yourself be moved to love.

This Christmas, let yourself be moved. Amen.