

Stephen Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

December 24, 2024

Year C, Christmas (I), Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 9:2-7](#)

[Titus 2:11-14](#)

[Luke 2:1-14\(15-20\)](#)

[Psalm 96](#)

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He came without ribbons. He came without tags.

He came without packages, boxes, or bags.

He came without gifts or an evergreen tree.

He came without specials we watch on TV.

He came without eggnog or carols or cards.

He came without twinkling lights in our yards.

He came in simplicity, humble and small,

Whose birth is the gift of salvation for all.

With apologies to Dr. Seuss and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

One of the things I love about the story of the Grinch is that it revels in the trappings of Christmas at the same time as it points out we don't need them. Whether your favorite version of the story is the children's book, or the classic cartoon special with Boris Karloff, or the live-action version with Jim Carrey, or the full-length computer animation one with Benedict Cumberbatch, every version has the most loving, beautiful illustrations of the lights and the wreaths and the tree, the stockings, the presents, the roast beast. And, of course, the Whos get them all back at the end, as the Grinch has his moment of conversion; as he realizes that Christmas doesn't come from a store, and his heart softens and grows three sizes, he brings it all back and joins the Whos in their celebration and sits down at table with them and carves the roast beast himself. It's as if to say: these things are good, yet they're not essential. It's good to have lights and presents and feasting, if they're available; but they're to be shared with all, not hoarded by one; and they're not the heart of the thing.

The heart is God joining us in this world. Not a fairy-tale world of candy canes and red-nosed reindeer, but a very ordinary world of a tired young couple, forced by powerful forces beyond their control to leave home and travel, unable to find a place to stay, huddled up in an improvised lodging. This is so important: when God entered this world it wasn't in comfort and power. There were no silk sheets, just a bed of straw. No servants, just a retinue of stable animals. No royal heralds and foreign ambassadors but an angelic announcement to ordinary laborers out in the fields. We look for greatness in the big and the beautiful, the successful, the wealthy, the important. And God says to us: are you looking for what really matters? Look to the backwater town, the no vacancy sign, the 3 a.m. feeding. Look to the baby in a makeshift cradle. Look to the humble places and the ignored places. That's where I'll meet you.

When Jesus grew up he wasn't a killjoy. In fact some people accused him of being too much the life of the party. They called him a glutton and a drunkard for being all too willing to sit down and feast with all comers, including tax collectors and outcasts and sinners. You might say he came to sit with us and carve the roast beast. Jesus knew how to enjoy good things with thanks, but he knew not to mistake the gifts for the Giver. As Saint Paul would later say, "I know what it is to have plenty and I know what it is to be in need; I have learned how to be content in abundance or in want. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Jesus came into this world, the same one we live in today. The passage of two thousand years has changed some things and not others. We have more technologies, but the human heart is still the same. Our world is perhaps gentler and more humane in some ways than the first century and crueler in others. We still live in a world where some have safety and comfort and others are forced from their homes or seek improvised shelter in the night.

This year in Bethlehem, for the second year in a row, there is no Christmas tree in Manger Square, no hanging lights or street celebrations, as the devastating war in Gaza continues.¹ Some of the headlines in the media read, “Christmas has been cancelled in Bethlehem.”² But Christmas hasn’t been cancelled, because Christmas is more than trees and lights. Jesus is being born again tonight and every night, in the rubble of a shattered building, in a tent under a freeway, in a refugee camp, in a kitchen with an empty pantry, in every place where today’s Marys and Josephs are looking for room in the inn, relying on the hospitality of strangers, holding tight to love and making unexpected community with shepherds.

He came into this world because he loved us, and he loves us still. He grew up, and he healed and taught and ate and drank with sinners, and his life of fierce love was too threatening for the Caesars and the priests of this world, and it led him straight to a cross where he died as he had been born, on the outskirts of the city, disrespectable and ignored, a nobody. But the life that was in him couldn’t be quenched and it burst back forth, now multiplied in his friends who found themselves filled with his Spirit and sent out to share his love in every place and time. When we respond to that love with an answering love in our own hearts, his life flows through us, a life that’s unlocked when we’re baptized in his name and that’s renewed in us each time we come to this holy table to share in the food and drink that are his living presence.

¹ Mustafa Abu Ganeyeh, “Another bleak Christmas in Bethlehem as Christian families quit West Bank,” Reuters (Dec. 1, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/another-bleak-christmas-bethlehem-christian-families-quit-west-bank-2024-12-01/>.

² E.g., Scott Neuman and Kat Lonsdorf, “There’s no Christmas in Bethlehem this year. With war in Gaza, festivities are off,” National Public Radio (Dec. 16, 2023), <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/16/1219245873/bethlehem-christmas-gaza-israel>.

He says to you tonight, “God loves you. Your life is precious. You can live a life that’s free, and whole, and healed, a life that means something, a life that starts here and continues on, because even death is not the end. And God loves everyone, all your siblings in this human family, even the worst ones. And there is a path to forgiveness and healing and restoration. And God will not rest until there is no more rubble, and no more empty pantries, and every tear is wiped from every eye.”

So here in this place where we are grateful to have them, we celebrate this holy night with carols and evergreens and candlelight. And we lift up our prayers for a world where these things are not just signs of a world to come but of its fulfillment, where the whole world blazes forth with the light of God’s love, a light that shines in the darkness and will never be overcome.