

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, '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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So 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. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

“Who Bugged the Manger?”

December 19, 2010

Rev. Charles Schuster

Members of the church invited me out. They have horses, Clydesdale horses, big horses. "Watch this," he said. Inside a fenced area where you could have had two football games at the same time, the whistle, the shed at the end of the field, the head that sticks out, the horse at the end of the pasture. He picks up his ears. He picks up his feet. He picks up his speed. And Curtis and I are in the field, and Benjie coming down on us like a train, like a 747, like a runaway truck, and I wanted to run. "Should we not be on the other side of the fence?" I said. And Benjie stopped and stood in front of us, this massive animal. I will never forget the day I first met Benjie. And he will never forget the day he first met me.

It came to pass, an event, three weeks ago in a sermon. In an, I think, pathetic attempt to make Christmas real and relevant, I threw out numerous life experiences, each one in a less-than-effective homilistical ploy. If you were here, you heard it. It was the Sunday after Thanksgiving, the first Sunday, beginning of Advent, and I would parrot the phrase, "Bingo, Christmas." "Look at this," I would say. "Kindness unexpected - Bingo, Christmas." "Look at this," I would say, "A reason to have faith again. Bingo, Christmas." "Look at this, love conquers evil. Bingo, Christmas." Right before Thanksgiving, Benjie looked at his solitary life and decided to go out, so to speak. So he went over the fence. Maybe through it, I'm not sure. It was a night on the town. It was a night to remember. A stallion on the loose is concerning. The veterinarian confirmed it, one of the mares is in a family way. She has been deflowered, pregnant. And I'm told by the owner of the horses, when the colt is born, they're going to call him "Bingo." When I asked if the

birth will happen in a stable on the 25th of this month, the answer was only partially affirmative. It will happen in a stable. It came to pass.

So much of life just comes to pass. Caesar Augustus issues a decree. Often, people in authority issue decrees trying to stop the things that come to pass, and often they cannot stop the things that come to pass. Often they try that, but you cannot control the things that come to pass. College student named Donna, good student in high school, but she got into college and things weren't going to well. Called her parents and said, "My grades are going to come in a letter. You go ahead and open them. But one of these classes, you know, I just didn't do so well, it didn't go as I had hoped. I want you to remember one thing," Donna said. "The initial of my name begins with a D." The letter came, the parents opened it, the grades were sent. Her mother called. Donna answered the cell phone. Her mother said, "Your grades have come in, Frank."

It came to pass. So much comes to pass, and there are these events, and we have to cope with them. We just do, because things come to pass, a decree goes out, and a child is born. It comes to pass there was a child born to Mary. We don't know what went on in the stable. It's a story. Nobody bugged the manger, but this child was born, and I believe an inconvenient circumstances, humble, and whether there was a decree or not, there is some thought it was perhaps a pre-census. Quirinius, the governor, Caesar Augustus. It came to pass, Luke says, Bethlehem, city of David. Mary and Joseph on a journey. A command performance. They had to be there. Luke says there was no room in the inn. The baby born in the stable. It came to pass, an event. It always does. We cope as best we can when it comes to pass. We cope.

Her name was Susan. Some things happen the way they should, and there is poetry in life. Some things happen in a random fashion, and there is a sense of chaos, and some things happen at precisely the wrong time, or precisely the wrong way. There's this feeling of doom. The problem, she became pregnant. It was terrible. She became pregnant. It wasn't because she didn't want to have another child. Her daughter Alison and another son or daughter would complete the family portrait as far as Scott and Susan were concerned. Scott and Susan would have been thrilled about the news, if they hadn't gotten some other news. Susan was pregnant, but they discovered she had cancer. You can't treat the cancer and keep the pregnancy viable. And if you proceed with the pregnancy, nine months without treatment. The risk was highest if the baby went full-term. It was a hard decision, hard as any of those kinds of decisions ever get. They came in to see me. They asked for my advice and prayer. I didn't know what to say, and I didn't know what to pray. Hypothetically, I knew what I would do. But when something like that comes to pass, it's not hypothetical. It's different.

And I remember something Bill Coffin said, "I used to be an incurable optimist, but now I'm cured." When you go into ministry, it's like a lot of other callings. Parenthood, for example, or medicine or science. You start out with more confidence. I can tell you, I never knew as much about running a church as the day I was ordained. As I recall, I think I had enough wisdom and sense to admit that I didn't know what they should do, but whatever their decision was, we would be there as a church to support them. And Susan and Scott decided to take the risk, and in December Alison got a little sister. Susan immediately began chemotherapy. I can still, in my mind, I can still look out on the church congregation and see Susan in church wearing a scarf. Susan began also at the same time video conversations to her daughters, because she figured if the cancer won, her daughters, both of them, would need to know that they were loved by their mother, especially the little one. She wanted the little one to know the decision to bring her into the world was a conscious, loving choice, and this little girl growing up must not have any guilt about that. The little girl was indeed beautiful. She was a blessing. She was the pride of their lives. Alison was a wonderful big sister. Two daughters, a courageous mother, a supportive

husband, an uncertain future. Born at Christmas. It was nativity, December, 2002. In the spring of 2003, the year I left Arvada to come to this church, one final task before the appointment here. We gathered at the church where Susan and Scott were married, where Alison and her sister were baptized, and we celebrated Susan's life. Yes, it came to pass, and we had to cope, and the baby was such a blessing. She brought such joy and happiness. Her temperament was sweet, her responses were loving. The bond in that family was strong. One of the last things Susan said to me before she died, she said, "In spite of all this, I know that we made the right decision, I made the right decision."

By the way, the baby's name was, and is, Grace. Grace. She is the grace of God, and like the Grace of God, that's how we cope, when it comes to pass. It comes to pass in our day, in our lives, and we have to cope. It always does. But we are called to cope when it comes to pass, because God doesn't give us burdens to test us, but when we are tested, God gives us the strength to face them. If you're facing what has come to pass, if you're up against it like Mary or Joseph or Susan or Scott, Christmas reminds us the baby born in Bethlehem, it came from the heavens, it came from God, call the child Joshua in Hebrew, call the child Jesus in Greek, call the child Grace, or Jesus, or Joshua, it means the lord will save us.

Sometimes it's not just an event that we cope with, and in the story of Luke's Gospel, there's another turn to it that we will want to know. Was the manger bugged, is that how someone knew? Or is it just the way it is, and it would be that way with any of us? You see, when there are these eventualities, something bigger than an event, an eventuality, that's more significant. Sometimes the significance is subtle, and we don't see it all. We can't see it all. We can't know it, because it takes a while. And when an eventuality happens, we have to ponder. We have to ponder an eventuality, hold these things in our heart. Second part of the story. It's in the name of the child, Jesus. The word Jesus means the Lord will save us, and Mary kept these things in her heart. She pondered.

Did you ever hear the story about the woman who went Christmas shopping with her kids? Hour after hour, and everything they saw, they wanted, and it was driving her crazy, and she was in one of these, probably, Babies R Us, Toys R Us, have you ever been in one of those? Oh, my goodness. She's in an elevator, and it's about this time in advent. They're knee-deep in Advent, just about now, time is running out, and she's had it, the parties, the house-warmings, the holiday foods, getting the perfect gift, sending the perfect card, the pressure. She was in this elevator, the elevator obviously descending, the door opens. There's a crowd of people in the elevator behind her. She shoves her way past to get to the door, drags her kids, arms loaded down, and then she snapped, and she said, "Whoever started this whole Christmas thing should be found, strung up, and shot." And from the back of the elevator, a voice in the quiet contemplation of anonymous shoppers, someone said, "Don't worry, we already crucified him." Ponder it. Keep it in your heart.

There is much to hold in our hearts. Sandy isn't a Christian. She's a rabbi. She wrote a book, *God's Echo*. She was here a month ago. Like Mary, she holds a child in her arms. It's her grandchild, and she thinks about her father. Her father, when he was alive, her father was her hero. He would pick her up in his arms and carry her up the stairs, singing, "Thank heaven for little girls," you know, Maurice Chevalier's song, if some of you remember that. She thought that song was written just for her. Her father died, when her son was 8. The son married, 22 years had passed, Sandy now was a grandmother. Her son's wife had a baby. She held the grandson. "I turned off the lights, I held this beautiful new life in my arms. The longer I looked, I could see his father's feet and hands, only smaller. I could see his mother's eyes and cheeks, all in miniature. And then, when I least expected it, I noticed something surprisingly familiar. There when his lips moved were my own father's mouth and chin." She held that in her heart. She goes on to say,

"You know, we have a name for when day fades into night, and a name for night when it opens into day? We call the light that is neither day nor night, dusk or dawn. And there is the delicate boundary, neither dark nor bright, where one time blends into another. And we also have a name for the light that is neither sun nor moon, when one generation falls into another, it is the spark of light, we call it the soul. Seeing my father in my grandson's face, I realized what a soul is, and how a soul never dies."

Sandy pondered it. She held it in her heart. Sometime, you've got to be a grandparent to understand the meaning of the birth of a child, and sometimes we never know. We never know. The information, the news from Denver, is devastating. A young woman, Laura, eight months pregnant, December 9, out on a walk. Someone in a dark SUV ran a stop sign and drove over her, instantly killing her unborn child, putting her in critical condition. Would she live, would she die? The person who hit her didn't wait around to find out. He fled, or she fled. They don't know. Her life was saved by the people who came to help, the paramedics, the police, the people on the street who saw the accident. Rushed to the hospital. Pete, her husband, you may have seen him being interviewed, kept the vigil. Katie, her sister, speaks of Laura's unbelievable strength. "You can see it in her eyes," she said. "She's amazing, she's going to live." Well, she's gotten better. There's a long road ahead for her, but she is going to live, and she may even come home for Christmas, and that family is grateful.

Sometimes we don't understand, and we hold these things in our heart, like Mary. Except it took a lifetime before she realized the importance of the child who came to earth to save us, her child. Not just her child. This child belonged to those who had gone before her. He belonged to David and Abraham and Moses. He belonged to Sarah and Miriam and Ruth and Esther and John the Baptist, and he belonged to those who would follow. He belonged to Cleopas and Paul and Timothy and Simon Peter. He belonged to Mary Magdalene and Salome and the old prophetess Anna. He belongs to the generations that follow. He belongs to the ages, and she looked into his eyes, and she wasn't sure what she saw. Maybe she saw the flame of the Holy Spirit in his eyes, maybe she saw the pain of the cross. We did crucify him, you know, and he did die for us. Or maybe she saw the joy of resurrection in a faint spark. Maybe it was that she saw the Ten Commandments morphing into the Beatitudes, or perhaps it was the Red Sea that split, and water turned to wine, or perhaps it was Mount Sinai blending into the Sermon on the Mount, or the Good Samaritan on the road and the disciples speaking in tongues on what we call Pentecost. Maybe she saw the flicker of the flame that would later spontaneously combust, and she held these things in her heart.

When there is eventuality, then you have to ponder it. Laura and Pete are pondering, so are their friends and family, moved here from Atlanta. A terrible accident, a hit and run, Laura eight months pregnant, her child killed, a life cruelly taken. Laura's grandparents will tell you they're holding these things in their hearts, pondering this eventuality. See, Laura's grandparents belong to us. Corrine and Dick Jansen, members of our church. Yes, something awful has come to pass, and God did not cause it. A careless driver caused it. Cruelly took the life of a baby, and almost the life of its mother. But hold this in your heart, if you will. That unborn baby boy, yes, boy, may have provided the cushion for his mother, that may have well contributed to the saving of his mother's life. A child at Christmas saved his mother's life. And the angel said to Mary, "Name your baby Jesus. It means God will save us." The baby was sent to save us. We have much this year to hold in our hearts.