

Draw Near

December 24, 2010
Luke 2:1-20

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Would you be willing to draw near, each of you...draw near into that old familiar cave in Bethlehem with the manger, the sheep and donkeys and oxen. Just imagine... there's the baby Jesus, asleep in the hay, and Mary, totally exhausted after all she's been through, and Joseph, wanting to be helpful but wondering exactly what it is he should be doing... Imagine all you like—but there's no magic in drawing near to a scene, however sweet, which no longer exists.

If that scene doesn't exist, maybe you'd be willing to draw near to the geographical birthplace of Jesus. To this day, in Bethlehem, stands the Church of the Nativity—a sort of "X marks the spot" built by Emperor Justinian in 530 AD, over the smaller church built by Constantine in 326 AD which was then built over the cave his mother Monica learned was the birthplace of Jesus. (The doorway into that ancient building, to prevent looting and military incursions—alas, unsuccessfully—is about 4 feet tall. You must enter practically on your knees.) Underneath that ancient structure which has withstood Crusader sieges and Christian, Persian, and Muslim oversight, sure enough, there's a cave. On its floor there's an impressive silver star claiming to mark the exact spot of Jesus' birth. Unfortunately the silver star was stolen in 1847—but the kind of world into which Jesus was born (whether on the spot marked by that particular "X" or not) hasn't changed much.

Battles and stealing; struggle and strife. In this dark and broken world; within each human heart. We know that drawing near to a geographic location isn't going to work any magic, either. After all, Bethlehem was crowded with all sorts of travelers that night the windows of heaven opened wide for the shepherds—did anyone else notice?

We cannot draw near to what we need, what we seek, by merely imagining very very hard. Nor by traveling to a historic location. Not by wishing to make it so. Yet each of you is here tonight. Whatever your reasons, you are welcome. Maybe you're here to set a good example for your children. Maybe to be more filled with hope, love, joy, and peace as an uncertain new year approaches. Maybe you want to join in the birthday party for Jesus! Maybe because your wife thought you should. Maybe you don't much believe in any of this religious stuff, but you thought "well, why not, I suppose it couldn't hurt." Maybe you're here to give thanks for your many blessings;

maybe to offer yourself once again as a living sacrifice, a loyal subject to your newborn King—the Lord over the universe.

Whatever your motives, you are welcome. Christ's Church is where we support one another in our honest questioning. No point in pretending. Every one of us is hungry for more, one way or the other. Even with pantries and refrigerators and department stores bursting—we are hungry for the Bread of Life which satisfies. Hungry for life on a deeper plane. Hungry for more loving relationships—beginning with me.

Whatever your motives, I hope tonight you will draw near to the timeless truth of what Luke is describing. The curtains into heaven opened wide, and the angel of God came down to announce that God had entered into the world in a unique way. In the city of David, Bethlehem, was born the Savior, somehow the Lord God, a source of joy for all the people. Then the glories of the heavenly choir tumbled forth: if you were here last Sunday morning to hear this choir you have a pretty good idea of how that angelic choir must have sounded. All our flowers and candles and beauty and cantatas and Hallelujah Chorus but a glimpse of the glory of God bursting forth!

You may or may not believe this scene literally took place as Luke describes it—but I give him a lot of credit. It's extremely gutsy for him to describe the birth of Jesus in this way! At the time, Caesar Augustus was widely proclaimed as Savior; it had been his birth which promised to be good news to the world. So who is this Jewish baby born in Bethlehem? (which was no advantage: like the Savior of the world born in King City or Buttonwillow. Unexpected, to the worldly.) How could he possibly have any influence beyond his own little family or village? Even at the time Luke wrote, maybe 40 years after the growing up and the healing and teaching and life and death and Resurrection of Jesus, and looking back on His birth, who did Luke think he was to claim, when the Christian Church was still but a burr in a feather of the regnant Roman eagle, that this Jesus would change the whole world? Change Rome? Israel? China? Iran? Germany?

Draw near; enter into the staggering hope of the vision of Luke. The reality of God's peace in Christ still breaks forth—one community at a time, one person at a time—and in the most unlikely places. In a troubled marriage.

Between total strangers. In a forlorn village in La Mision, Mexico. On the battle front. A prominent American pastor was a soldier in WW II. He lost an eye and was taken prisoner by German forces on Christmas Eve. He was taken to a field hospital, but nothing could ease the horrible pain where his eye had been or the desperate loneliness in his heart. He felt no peace on earth; surrounded by his enemy, he didn't know if he'd make it 'til Christmas Day.

A wounded German soldier in the cot next to him started speaking, weakly— himself in great anguish. A hand slowly reached out to the frightened American's, who could not understand German. But suddenly he realized the German was straining to sing. He was singing "Silent Night, Holy Night" in German. Soon all the prisoners with a voice joined in, and the nurses, and the guards, and the doctors—all singing in praise to the Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Peace on earth was not accomplished—but peace came to those troubled people in that painful place. [As told by the Rev. Robert A Beringer]

However glorious those Bethlehem fields, however peaceful the scene in the cave, it was a broken world then as it is now. Did you notice the angel had to reassure the shepherds "do not be afraid?" The glory of God overwhelming their senses—and they have to be reminded, "Do not be afraid?"

Are you afraid of things which keep you from drawing near to the divine Presence? At a very deep level we vulnerable creatures have reason to be afraid of the Creator; as darkness is afraid of the light which vanquishes it; as the powerless quail before those in power; as the corrupt blushes before the holy.

I remember when I was a young man and my dad was alive I see now I was at some level afraid of him. Not physically or even emotionally—by then I was bigger and stronger than my dad, and I loved him, and I liked him, and I knew he had always loved me and provided for me and taught me in important ways. He spent thousands of hours teaching me. But I was not comfortable talking with him about things important to me. He never gave me bad counsel—but somehow I never felt very good asking for it. I have come to understand why I kept away from him, and it's very sad: sad for both of us.

When I would ask my dad how I should behave, or what decision I should make, he was truthful. He was direct. He was wise. So why would I stay away from him, or at least talking about important things with him? I'll bet you know: Because I wasn't doing what he was telling me to do. I wasn't choosing the paths he told me I should be choosing. I knew what he would say before asking, and I

knew I wasn't always living up to it. So I stayed away and quit listening. It was a lot easier to not ask him for advice and not to have to feel badly, or ashamed, about the ways I felt I was falling short. How sad: now that I have my own children (increasingly adult,) and now that my dad's no longer alive, I am so sorry I didn't get close to him and enjoy him a lot differently.

Are you reluctant to draw near to God? We cannot draw nearby trying to enter into a picture-perfect sanitized Christmas card tableau; nor by trekking to a particular place; we cannot deeply experience God if we feel frightened or guilty or ashamed. If He is holy and good and wise and I fall short, I need help. Whether I understand it or not, believe it or not. I need Someone to do for me what I cannot do for myself—to bring me back. I need a Savior.

Luke's magnificent story explains that God has drawn near to us in Jesus. God wants to bring us back. God has seen the pain and anguish in the world. Through Israel God had sent commandments and covenants and patriarchs and prophets and heroes in the faith. God had worked through philosophers and gurus and wise people in other parts of the world. Yet we continued go astray and then stay away; continued to ignore the divine counsel and as a result live in the muck and mire and wars of this world.

Words of love are one thing but a love which acts and risks and gives itself is another. For centuries the people of God had been told that God loved them and had delivered them in ages past. But in Jesus, God took the risk of becoming human to show us how to live as human beings. How to live in the Kingdom. To show us how God loves us, how God wants us to draw near.

How low could He come to reach us? Coming down from the blazing glories of the highest heaven—and a donkey could have stepped on Him. Herod's soldiers could have killed him. He was probably shivering from the cold; maybe He had colic. The Lord of the universe, in diapers, for God's sake! He would grow up to be misunderstood and betrayed. He ended up nailed to the cross. Maybe His followers would stand by Him; maybe they would betray Him. Maybe they would live as transformed citizens in His Kingdom—or maybe keep their distance, trying to enjoy the old securities and safeties.

But just maybe they lived with Him and learned from Him and kept selling Him short—but in time His Holy Spirit turned many of them into heroic figures. Many boldly sailed to the four corners of the globe and showed foreign lands and peoples, in costly love, the wonders of His love. Eleven of His twelve disciples gladly met

their violent death as martyrs rather than betray Him again. His band of powerless, imperfect followers were regular people like you and me—yet their faithful witness shone as a blazing light in the darkest of times, and their uncompromising generosity toward their own and toward outsiders eventually won over the once mighty Roman Empire.

Maybe they, also, struggled with trying to have it both ways: “Jesus, help me get in touch with my spirituality.” “Jesus, please bless my decision, now that I have already made it.” “Jesus, I want to enjoy the peace of the Christmas scenery and songs—but I have no intention of yielding control of my life over to You...” (Not to worry: you are not the only one. I can try to keep a foot in both kingdoms; all of us can.) The obvious questions need to be asked, however: did any spirituality you’ve ever embraced take the risk of living and then dying for you? Are you living in the peace you long for? Is your life going as hoped, if you are managing it all yourself? What kind of crazy god would love you and me, as God alone does?

Talk is cheap: Jesus shows us the costly risk God took to draw near to us, to be born of Mary in Bethlehem. A poem by Madeleine L’Engle captures it this way:

This is not time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war and hate,
And a nova lighting the sky to warn
That time runs out, and the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In the land in the crushing grip of Rome.
Honor and truth were trampled by scorn,
Yet here did the Savior make His home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth.
And by greed and pride the sky is torn,
Yet love still takes the risk of birth.”

God has taken this risk of birth for each of us, in Christ. The baby grew up, and He did not come to be cooed over and clucked at. He came to be followed and obeyed so that His love could re-make us entirely. “The Son is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact representation of His very being, sustaining all things by His powerful word.” [Hebrews 1:3]

The Creator of the universe has drawn near to you in love. What is keeping you away? Maybe you once sensed the love of God so deeply—but things changed. Maybe you have been allowing others to bear too much of a burden for the fears you continue to harbor. Maybe you no longer feel your highest hopes and dreams and ideals align with

who you have become. Maybe you were managing your own life well enough until something unforeseen came at you and you were reminded again that you do not control your own destiny or even your own happiness.

But you may draw near again—even at Christmas Eve, even to begin 2011. Maybe you have been richly blessed, but you know there must be more and you are eager to give back more for the One who blesses you. Maybe you are hanging on by a thread—but you know better than anyone it’s His love and Holy Spirit keeping you secure from day to day and His security is enough. Maybe you are willing to allow the glory of God and His loving assignment for your life to shatter what you have been dabbling in.

Draw near to Him again, this God who sustains the galaxies and fixes the tides and rules over empires—this God who has taken the risk of drawing near to you in the baby Jesus. Draw near to Him on your knees, in humility.

He will raise you up; keep drawing near and He will keep filling your life with His glory, His beauty, and His love.

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.