

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: December 24, 2022, Yr. A, Christmas Eve

Using Sanctified Art "From Generation to Generation" theme and designated readings (slightly adapted from the Lectionary)

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Title: "We Tell this Story" (Theme from *Sanctified Art*)

Focus: This story of Jesus' birth so strongly conveys the love of God for humankind that it needs to be told and retold so that it may shape our identity as those who are deeply loved by God. We must tell this story.

Gospel Reading: Luke 2:1-20 The Birth of Jesus

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph 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. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,* the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,* praising God and saying,

¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

¹⁵ 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.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Family Stories: What's a story in your family that needs to be told again and again?

What story so shapes your identity that you have to tell it over and over?

What's a story that's so a part of your family identity that you have to tell it, again and again? You have to tell it because it is a part of what makes you **You**. It is a family story that shapes your character or your identity. It's a story that you have to tell from generation to generation because if this is something that has shaped you, then the next generation needs to hear it and be shaped by it as well.

My Own Family Story

In a sermon a few weeks back on All Saints Day, I opened the sermon by saying that we are all shaped by birth family or our family of origin. One of the things I told the congregation in that sermon was that I have been shaped by the death of my mother, which happened when I was six.

At just 6 years old, I have memories of time with my mom, but, frankly, they're kind of fuzzy and non-specific. I also know some factual bits and pieces: She went to Bancroft Junior High in Los Angeles. She was valedictorian of her high school class at Hollywood High and went on to USC, where she graduated with honors.

- *Display photo of my mom from her high school yearbook.*

I wish I knew her better. There are stories about her I'd like to hear. I wish I knew more.

My mom had just one sibling—my Uncle Rob, who is married to my Aunt Joyce. Rob and Joyce knew each other back in high school, so Joyce knows my mom as well. My dad died in 2008—that's now over 14 years ago. So, Rob and Joyce are the only ones of their generation. They themselves were married at ages 25 and 23 and now, 62 years later, are 87 and 85. They're the only ones who know first-hand some of these family stories.

In the last year, I have had many conversations with my Aunt Joyce. One time, she said something to me like, **"You sound just like your mother when you say that!"**

Boy, I latched on to that. I wasn't sure what I had said or how that related to my mother.

- *What was it that sounded like my mother?*
- *How did she sound?*
- *What was she like?*

I wanted my aunt to tell me more, describe it as best she could, because I have no other source, no other way of knowing. It's like I'd like to go back in time and roll the

video of what my mom was like because I have no other way of knowing. But, of course, there is no video, no way of seeing the mannerism or the way of phrasing something, or, more importantly, what was she like—her character and way of being and seeing and understanding how I may be like that in some way. I only have some brief comments from my aunt and the scattering of facts I know.

And now Rob and Joyce, now in their mid-80s, are the only ones in their generation. They're the only ones with firsthand knowledge and recollection of those family stories and that link to my mom.

I don't want to be a bother to them, but I want to hear these kinds of stories. I have a thirst for them. I want to know more about what my mom was like and understand how I may be like her. And time is precious and memories fade. My aunt and uncle aren't going to be able to tell these stories much longer.

I bought a book for Rob and Joyce called a *Family Legacy Book* to have a place to insert pictures and tell stories. They're the only ones who can tell certain stories about my mom and family.

From the publisher: There are sections for Family, Childhood, Love, About Me, Adventures, and Advice. There is also space for a family tree as well as all the basic facts (birthdays, places you've lived, etc.), and blank pages in the back of the book for additional thoughts or notes.

Is there a family story like that for you? What is so compelling that you want to hear the story again and again? Who are the people who have shaped your life and the person you have become and are becoming? Is there a story like that in your family heritage? What would people say is an essential quality or characteristic of being in your family, like Aunt Joyce said to me, "Oh you sound just like your mother!"

The Story of God's Love in Jesus

This story from Luke about the birth of Jesus is a story like that. It's a story that shapes our identity—it shapes who we are and how we think of ourselves. It's a story that shapes an essential quality or characteristic of ours. It's a story that must be told and retold to make sure that that essential quality or characteristic is not lost, but is noted and marked and retained. Maybe even treasured.

Luke is the storyteller in this case. He tends to have an eye for detail: He tells us things like, **"This was the first registration (or census) and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria"** (Luke 2:2).

- Which tells us, for instance, when this happened and who was in charge and that what they decided that had an impact on people and why Jesus was born where he was . . .

But what does the story tell us about *identity*—what does it tell us about who we are or about who God is or about who Jesus is? What essential quality or characteristic does it reveal? Amidst the details of Luke’s story, what’s the heart of the story? What does it mean or what does it say about God?

This is a story about love. This is a story about God so loving humankind that God would choose to fully enter the human experience by becoming fully human in Jesus.

This is about recognizing that God was active throughout human history, seeking to offer people a second chance or a way back to God through the voices of the prophets, for instance, but that now God had become fully human in Jesus as a way of reconciling humankind back to God or offering forgiveness and a new connection.

This is a story about God choosing to work through ordinary people, like Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds to be the first ones to care for Jesus, to recognize him, and to tell others this story of good news. That God would choose to work through ordinary people and not seek out the rich and powerful is another sign that this is, as the angels said,

“Good news of great joy for all the people” (Luke 1:10).

This is a story of God choosing—as motivated by love—to experience all the hardships and losses and vulnerabilities that humankind can experience. Jesus was first of all vulnerable in being born as an infant, but he demonstrated this vulnerability throughout his life:

- He experienced hunger and thirst.
- He cried at the death of a friend.
- He knew pain—physical and otherwise.
- He experienced despair and isolation and loneliness.
- He was betrayed by a friend and had others deny knowing him and others who scattered and abandoned him when he most needed them.
- In the face of this, he repeatedly demonstrated self-giving love.

This is a story of God who loves us and came to us as Emmanuel, God with us, and who gave himself for us.

This is a story that should shape us—it should shape our character or identity. It should shape how we view ourselves:

How should we see ourselves because of what we know of God from this story?

- I am a child of God.
- I belong to God, who loves me.

- I belong to God by grace – which is God's free gift of love that I do not deserve and cannot earn.
- God loves me in spite of all I do wrong.¹
- Knowing this steadfast love, we trust that “No matter where we go, No matter what we say, No matter what we do, We belong to God.”²

This is a story that we need to tell and retell so that that identity—of knowing that we are a beloved child of God—is not lost—so that that knowledge of or experience of the love of God is not lost or overlooked.

We need to tell this story and tell it as a love story, saying “This is how much God loved the world and how much God loves you, that God would become fully human in Jesus as a sign of God’s love.”

Thanks be to God for a love like that.

¹ These assertions are drawn from questions 1-4 of *Belonging to God: A First Catechism*. Approved by the 210th General Assembly (1998) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

² Words of Forgiveness from this evening’s service from *Sanctified Art*.