

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2021

THE SMALL AND LARGE STORY

This is the night of the story. How we approach this story determines how much it has to do with the story of our lives. And there is the very real possibility that our approach may be too small for the large story we hear this night. Some might not think we are talking about a large story when it is just an account of the birth of a poor child long ago. Those who have had the experience of giving birth or worrying about someone who is doing so, even with the support of medical staff and a hospital know such an experience can lead to anxious times. Mary and Joseph did not have that kind of support. Neither did they have assistance from their families because of a decree from the Roman emperor requiring people to register in the location of their family heritage. Since they were descendants of King David, who had been born in Bethlehem long before, they had to make an 80-mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register there at a very inopportune time. Of course, there was no way for them to arrange for accommodations in Bethlehem ahead of time. The town was crowded with the registration going on, so the only place they could find shelter was a stable for animals. How frustrating and frightening that all must have been! I dare say the urgency of such a moment would have pressed Mary and Joseph to focus on their own small story of anxiously going through a medical situation they hadn't encountered before without any visible support of those around them.

Indication had come that a larger story, a holy story, had intersected their own life stories through an earlier angel conversation, but that had been nine months before. And currently they were caught in a whirlwind of change, filled with confusing realities. The baby is born, but then they would have the concerns of providing for their own and their newborn child's needs while having nowhere to be but in a dirty, smelly stable far from home.

The Luke account then moves us to a field just outside Bethlehem where we are told shepherds were watching their flock by night. They would have spent many nights

doing the same thing. They had to be extra vigilant since nighttime was when potential predators, a wolf, bear, or coyote would be most active in trying to get at the sheep which were in their care. There was a hint of things beyond their own small stories as they looked up at the stars and the moon each night, as they saw there was enough food and water for their sheep and for them. Perhaps they would also have known that David as a boy, before he became Israel's greatest king, had also been a shepherd perhaps using the same fields where they were. But shepherds at that time typically led fairly isolated lives. With their dirty work with the animals, they would not have been ritually pure enough to participate in a faith community. It would have been easy for them to be mostly focused on their own small story which didn't connect with many others or with God.

Remember, there was a larger story at work, this one an oppressive one, with someone who was called an emperor, titled Caesar, by simple decree telling all sorts of people that he didn't care about inconveniences within their lives. He cared only that all the people would be listed so the money from the taxes that gave him power over them would flow. They had no choice but to go immediately where they had been directed.

However, the story of this night tells us there was an even larger story at work. An angel from the Lord appeared to the shepherds letting them know that God was doing something very special in the birth that very day just over in Bethlehem of a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord! The angel gives an invitation for them to go see for themselves what God was doing, surprisingly telling them they would find a child swaddled in bands of cloth, located not in the nicest facility in town, but actually lying in a food structure for animals, a manger. Then comes another shock as the shepherds then see a whole multitude of angels joining the first angelic messenger and they hear them expressing their praise of God saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill!"

After the angels leave, the shepherds decide to explore how their own smaller stories relate to this larger story which had been revealed to them. We're not told whether they take their sheep with them or leave a shepherd behind to watch the flock, but they go and find what the angels had told them about, a newborn baby wrapped in bands of cloth lying in a manger. They must have been surprised that no one else was

with this special baby other than its parents - no mayor of the town, no Roman official, no rabbi or priest, no servants – no one other than them! They share with Mary and Joseph the account of the larger story that had been shared with them by the angel. Luke tells us that Mary treasured and pondered the account of their experience these shepherd visitors had told. We get a sense that the shepherds also told others as well about what they had heard and seen, for Luke indicates that all were amazed by the account of their experience. The shepherds return to the place of their responsibilities, the field, I'm sure looking up time and again to see where first one angel and then a whole multitude of angels had appeared to them, repeatedly checking with one another, seeking some confirmation from the others of their own experience that God's story which brought Messianic hope and the possibility of saving redemption had come into their own life's story.

I'll speak for myself that the story comes to me not through an angel visitation, but through accounts of those who experienced that larger story connecting with their own smaller stories. We do have something beyond what the shepherds and Mary and Joseph had that night. We have been told who that infant grew up to be. We have heard of God's presence with humanity coming through Jesus with the descriptions from Isaiah resonating with us as a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. This would be the One who would help us know that there is a divine story taking place that is bigger than even the big stories of political turmoil and pandemic and climate change. He brings God's light even in the darkest of times, assuring us that God is committed to what is just and right. This would be the One who invites us to connect our stories with God's purposes and to increase the size of our own stories by recognizing that love for God has to be connected with love of neighbor.

Each year at this time, the Glee Club of Spelman College shares a song written for it, whose words include the following:

We are "Christ among us" and we live for his cause
To fulfill his purpose daily as we bring Joy to all.
We are comfort for the hurting, mending each broken heart
We are friends to the lonesome and unite those far apart.

We're his Hands who touch the sick and they're instantly whole
We are water for the thirsty and bring peace to every soul.

We are Christmas, we are God's hands
To care for one another in these war torn lands.
We are Christmas, the love that we share
Will carry one another 'til we understand
We are Christmas.¹

I love the lighting of candles and the singing of carols this night. But the celebration of the story of this night can go further than that. As the big story of God's coming into humanity connects with and transforms our own small stories, our lives become part of the Christmas celebration. The story, as big as God's love, is more than big enough to reach to those who are isolated, alienated, guilt-ridden, despairing, or grieving. We can relish the story of this night, for it has the potential to make each one of our life's story so much larger than it otherwise would be through connections to God and neighbor. We move toward embracing the larger story as we too respond to what we have heard and seen, as we join in celebrating along with the angels this night proclaiming with candles and carols, words and actions, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill!" We become an expression of Christmas. Even through the birth of an infant so small, this largest of stories comes to us and can transform us this night. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.

¹ Sarah Stephens, Kevin Johnson, We Are Christmas, written for Glee Club of Spelman College.