

A Sermon for the Nativity of Our Lord
December 24, 2020
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The World Spins, Jesus Remains

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. Luke 2:1-20

Every year at Christmas, there is a German Christmas pyramid in the center of our table. It was a gift from my mother early on in our marriage, and it came from the Lillian Vernon catalog before there was such a thing as online shopping. There are three levels filled with angels, shepherds, magi, sheep and camels, and in the center, the Holy Family. When the candles at its base are lit, the warmth from the candlelight rises up and when it reaches the blades at the top, the pyramid begins to spin, a beautiful Christmas merry go round.

Over the years, the scientists in our household have experimented to determine the best height of the candles, how many candles should be lit at one time, and the perfect slant of the adjustable blades to make the pyramid rotate at just the right speed. Some years my boys delighted in changing the slant of the blades to make the whole thing spin backwards! Too much change in any of these variables can produce messy melting wax, a speed so high we cannot see the tiny figures, or fire-singed blades at the top. Through all of these trials and chaos, Jesus has remained unscathed.

Over the years a few bits and pieces have fallen off, been glued back on, or lost in the packing away for the next year. But this treasure has been a constant at our Christmas table, even as loved ones have come and gone, or live too far away, or this year, cannot attend because of the pandemic. This small, fiery, spinning centerpiece reminds us of the Christmas story and of love shared through the years, no matter what else was going on in the world around us. It pulls us away from all the other trappings of Christmas, gathers us around the table, and provides us with a moment of quiet and stillness in the ever changing and challenging landscape of life. It reminds us of the constancy of God's love even as our journey continues. In that moment, God enfolds us in the warmth and light of peace, in the assurance of Jesus.

The Gospel reading tells the beautiful, timeless story of Mary and Joseph on their journey; caught up in life circumstances not of their own making. Worried about how they would care for their child, oppressed by the heavy rule of the empire that forced them to travel, not knowing where they would find shelter, they were weary and in need of a resting place, some hopefulness and reassurance.

Meanwhile, the shepherds were in the fields, working late into the night in challenging conditions, sleepless from the cold and their constant vigilance for predators. They were also waiting for something, longing for an end to the hardships of life.

This year, perhaps more than any other, we are in need of a moment of quiet and stillness. The world has been spinning too fast, metaphorically melting us, burning us, and blurring our sense of normalcy. Each of us can tell a story of how challenging our year has been, even as we hope for an end to the spinning chaos and for things to be restored. We need reassurance that Jesus remains.

Like the Holy Family and the shepherds, we are weary and longing for some rest, some hope and heavenly peace. We long for healing in this world, among those we love, and in our own hearts. At the end of a long and trying year we want to believe that everything is going to be alright; that the hopes and fears of all the years will be met in the Christ child tonight.

This is what God gives us for Christmas; a moment in time when we can stop the frantic spinning of this world, a moment when all is calm, all is bright. Though nothing else seems right, on this night we can focus on Emmanuel, God with us, and know that Jesus remains.

The light of Christ spins gently within us, stirring our memories and warming our hearts. As we light a candle and hear the story of God who loves us so much that he came to be among us and remain with us always, may we believe, tonight and always, that no matter how fast the world spins, Jesus remains. Amen.