

“Holy To the Touch”¹
Luke 2:1-20
First Presbyterian Church
Christmas Eve 2021

Luke 2:1-20

The Birth of Jesus

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

The Shepherds and the Angels

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 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: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13 And 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.” 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying, and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Sermon

Presbyterian pastor, James Lowry, recalls how both of his grandmothers always made quite a “to-do” of getting ready for Christmas. They just did it very differently. His Grandmother Lowry lived and raised her children in Seneca, South Carolina... which was the “Up Country” as they called it.

¹ This sermon borrows (and quite often directly quotes) the stories told by James Lowry in his sermon, “*Mary’s Song*,” published in *Low-Back, Ladder-Back, Cane-Bottom Chairs*, p. 16-21.

And especially memorable in all of this “to-do” about Christmas was the annual “*making of the fruitcake.*” Young Jim knew how important it was because for years he had helped her bake the cakes. His job was to chop the nuts and to cut the candied fruit into small pieces... hers was to do the measuring and mixing. And he remembers that as he cut and she mixed, she half hummed and half sang, in her clear alto voice... “*Gentle Mary laid her child, lowly in a manger.*”

Well, after the cakes were baked and wrapped, they had to be delivered... and Lowry especially remembered delivering a fruitcake to one of his grandmother’s well-to-do friends. When they arrived, they were, of course, invited into the parlor (this was the South, after all!). He recalled it being “quite formal and quite fine. And he writes: As previously instructed, I sat quietly and only spoke when spoken too. Yet, from the corner of my eye I could see on a table across the room the most magnificent manger scene I had ever seen. No doubt seeing me glance in its direction, and at last, taking me by the hand to be sure I wouldn’t touch, our hostess invited me to walk with her to take a closer look. As we looked, my grandmother took my other hand as a double measure of insurance... and explained to me that all the figures were made of finest china... so fine, in fact, that our hostess had not trusted the pieces to be packaged for shipment, but had wrapped them in tissue and held them in her lap for the long trip across the Atlantic Ocean, all the way from England where they had been made. They were all in purest white. You could almost see through the angels’ wings. The shepherd’s crook was as fine as a thread. The swaddling clothes were paper thin and gave the appearance of wondrous softness. Mary’s hands and fingers were clearly defined; I had never seen anything so fragile, except they were gentle more even than fragile. The lesson I learned that day was that something **holy** was happening... something SO holy and SO precious it could not be touched. And that’s a wonderful lesson to learn from two women, both of whom were well versed in standing reverently before that which is unspeakably holy. The unfolding of the sovereign will of God is always unspeakably holy. It cannot be touched.

Lowry’s other grandmother, his Grandmother Banks, also made quite a to-do about getting ready for Christmas; but in a very different way. Grandmother Banks lived in Saint Matthews, South Carolina, which was in the “Low Country” as they called it. She also made fruitcake at Christmas and she also, like Tom Sawyer, had convinced her grandchildren that chopping nuts and cutting up candied fruit was a task of great honor. But “other than that,” he writes, “Almost nothing was the same about my grandmothers. The fruitcakes didn’t even smell alike. Because as it happened, my Grandmother Banks had a secret ingredient she poured over the top of the fruitcake after the cake had had a chance to cool. She explained that she got this special ingredient from Kentucky where they are especially gifted at making it. She further explained that the secret ingredient was to keep the cake moist, but while she poured the secret ingredient she sang, “’Tis the season to be jolly, fa la la la la, la la la la.” Not a bad lesson to learn, especially the jolly part.

The crèche at my Grandmother Banks’s house was different, too... not at all like the lovely white delicate one in the parlor of my Grandmother Lowry’s well-to-do friend. My Grandmother Banks’s creche was built with children in mind. She had a great big gourd the size of a bushel basket. My Grandfather Banks had cut a hole in the side of the gourd and painted the inside dark blue to look like the sky. He dotted the sky with stars and even installed a little electric light that could be turned on to be the Christmas star. And best of all, they had a shoebox filled to overflowing with a wonderful assortment of mix-and-match figures.

Most of the figures were chipped and bruised, and the angels' wings were bent from years of touching and pretending. But for weeks before Christmas, as a way of getting ready, the gourd was kept on the floor with the box of figures beside it. Together they were an invitation for children of all ages to arrange and rearrange the figures and to tell the story to anyone who would listen. And most important, it was a chance for little people and big people alike to become part of the story of that remarkable birth. Touching the story... and believing yourself to be part of the story... are most remarkable lessons to be learned from a most remarkable woman.

So, what is this thing we do at Christmas? Is it something so holy it cannot be touched... so sacred that we can only stand quietly and pray? Or is it something so human it has to be touched, lest it get away and we miss it? Well, of course, it is both. For on this night, we stand gazing at something so amazing... so mysterious... so sacred... so unspeakably holy... it cannot be touched. But, as one preacher has said, we must never forget that "what Mary and Joseph got this night was no Hallmark baby; but a belching, squalling infant who kept them up nights for weeks... and that in choosing to make his entrance in such an ordinary way, God showed us that flesh and blood, dirt and sky, life and death were good enough for him. More than that, he hallowed them... made them holy by taking part in them... and left us nothing on earth we can dismiss as trivial or unknown to him."²

Legend has it that on Christmas Eve long ago, Saint Francis and his ragged followers staged a small nativity play. Scrounging materials from the garbage bins of Assisi, they made costumes out of rags and pieced together a small manger from some old boxes they had found. They stuffed it with hay collected from the streets, and into the cradle Francis placed a discarded wooden doll, a bambino some child had grown tired of. Later that night, the legend goes, Francis picked up the doll... and as he spoke about the mystery of the word made flesh, the baby in his arms came to life.³

My friends, what this night says is that God by coming to us as one of us, God has forever blurred the distinction between what is holy and what is ordinarily human. God has come among us... and now every ordinary, created thing has become transparent with his glory. There is gold in the straw and myrrh in the dung on the floor, the cows smell of frankincense, the dogs bark hosanna, and the star shows seekers from every corner of the earth where to look for God – not up in the heavens, but down in the gorgeous muck and hubbub of the world."⁴

As to the whereabouts of the beautiful creche of his Grandmother Lowry's well-to-do friend, he doesn't know. But because it was so lovely, Lowry hopes it is somewhere working its magic and telling its story of something so unspeakably holy it cannot be touched. And as to the whereabouts of his Grandmother Banks's crèche, unfortunately there was a fire in the family home, and it was burned along with everything else. But... unknown to anyone, every fall for a number of years his father, a great grower of gourds, began saving seeds from the largest gourd of the summer.

² Taylor, Barbara Brown, "*Decked Out in Flesh*," a sermon published in *Mixed Blessings*, p. 51.

³ *ibid*, p. 52

⁴ *ibid*, p. 52

And every spring he planted those seeds... and every fall he saved the seeds from the largest gourd. And before too many years, his father had produced a gourd large enough to be set aside for its holy, but altogether touchable purpose. His mother found a hodgepodge of figures to put beside it... and when the Christmas rolled around the next year, there they were on the floor, just in time for his children and their cousins to touch and pretend and learn and tell the story to whoever might listen. Amen.