

Christmas Day

Dec. 25, 2024

Natividad and the Word of God

The Rev. Barbara Ballenger

You'd think the sign that God was doing something new and amazing on the first Christmas would have been the angels. You'd think the sign would have been the heavenly hosts singing, *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, in exquisite angel song. Divine light so bright it filled you with terror –that would be an unmistakable sign.

But the sign that what they were singing about was the real deal, the angels insisted, was the child himself. This baby born in a stable, who was wrapped up like any baby of the time would be, was the sign that God was saving God's people. The sign that the shepherds would understand and recognize was not the heavenly being but the earth-bound child.

What does this say about God's signs, about how God manifests among us? We look to the skies, and the skies tell us to look to our feet, where humility makes its home.

Humility is a word that means "close to the earth", and it calls to mind for me a Christmas story that I heard more than 35 years ago in a church that Jess and I attended in Rochester, NY. I call this story Natividad and the Word of God. I told it earlier this year in Lent, but since it's Christmas, when we tune into our favorite seasonal stories over and over again -- it's worth retelling.

After we got married Jess and I started attending Corpus Christi Church which was a Roman Catholic parish in Rochester New York. The parish had a long-standing relationship with some of the churches in El Salvador, sort of like St. Peter's has with churches in Guatemala. Our priest, Fr. Jim, had just returned from a trip to El Salvador, and he came back with this sweet little story.

Shortly after Fr. Jim arrived in the village where they were staying, he met a little girl named Natividad, which means Nativity. It was right before Christmas. How cool is that? Jim soon learned that Natividad's greatest desire was to learn how to read. So, right there outside in the dust, they had their first lesson. They knelt down on the ground. Fr. Jim found a nail nearby, and he began to scratch out words in the dirt in Spanish. He wrote *Dios*,

which means God. He wrote *Amor*, which means love. Natividad copied them down, and sounded them out, and wrote and read her first words of faith. Words she already knew by heart. She was just learning how to spell them and tell them.

When Fr. Jim returned to Corpus Christi, which means body of Christ, he wrote an article in the bulletin about Natividad and the Word of God and the meaning of the word humility. He pointed out that the word humility – where we get the word humble – means being “close to the Earth.” Which is where God came to be one of us, as Jesus the Word made flesh. Jim told the story of how Natividad learned the word of God in a country where there was a lot of war and conflict. And he told the story of the power of humility in a country that ran on humiliation, or shame.

It's important to remember that there is a difference between humiliation and humility. When a person humiliates another, they make them feel like dirt. We learn this very young. On the playground – where we find the bully who makes fun of the kid that looks and acts a little different than everyone else. Surrounding the bully are kids that either join in the laughter or stay silent, rather than sticking up for the person being hurt. Humiliation is a tool that people use to make others feel small so they themselves can feel bigger in comparison. No one chooses to be humiliated. It's done to them.

But humility, being humble, that is a something we choose for ourselves. When someone chooses to be humble, they put down their own desire for power, their own wish to look like everyone else, or fit in; they do that in order to make sure that someone else is cared for, or included, or has what they need in order to feel good about themselves. We learn that when we're young too. Back on the playground, choosing to befriend and defend someone who is being bullied when no one else will do it; that's an act of humility, of being humble. It might mean that you'll be bullied or rejected too, but that doesn't matter.

Whenever I think of the word humility, I think of that story of Jim and Natividad and the Word of God. Jim knelt down in the dust with Natividad because Jim knew the story of Christmas, of God bending low to be born as Jesus, a baby

so powerless, he needed people's love and care and protection in order to survive.

God chose to join us, to pour out the divine self into our dust and close the divine distance, in order to save, to deliver and to reorient humanity – and all of creation – back to the goodness that God first intended for us. To save us from our worst selves. To deliver us from the path of destruction we get on over and over again. To put us back into relationship with the divine so that it's clear that God is God and we are not, though we are invited to dwell in the Divine Kingdom as God's children. This was the task of Christmas, and the task of Easter, and the ongoing task of Jesus set loose in the world through us, the Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ. That's why we tell this story every single week in our fellowship and our prayers and our breaking of the bread.

In tonight's Christmas story a humble God lands in the lives of humble people. The shepherds who tended their flocks by night, who weren't even part of that census going on in Bethlehem, they were close to the earth, looking low, tending humble creatures raised both for food and for ritual sacrifice.

An angel who wanted to get the shepherds' attention would have to walk right up and stand in front of them, then point to the skies where the rest of the Heavenly Host was tuning up. Shepherds looked low because that was where danger lay – where the wolf or bear snuck in to threaten their flock. Low was the direction of the grass of the field, and the sheep bedded down for the night. So God put the divine self low where the shepherds were looking. And that's where they found the sign that would help the shepherd's believe the word of the angels in the sky -- a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes asleep in a stable, a setting pretty familiar to shepherds and the like.

That's how God gets our attention. By putting the divine self where we are looking. By putting the divine voice in the places where we are listening. And if we are looking and listening with faithful intention – the way that Mary and Joseph and all the faithful ones of Israel did – then we shall see and hear God.

I hate to tell you this, but the author of the Gospel of Luke takes some liberties with the Christmas story. There are details you won't find in any other Gospel.

And there are facts you won't find in any history book – the name of the governor at the time is wrong, Herod had died four years earlier. There are no records of a census like this one.<sup>1</sup> But Luke's Christmas story was written to make us acknowledge the highs and the lows of the time and to differentiate between the God who has come to save and the false gods that enslave.

Luke wrote this Christmas story to help us to look low for God's salvation, to where the sheep are, and the shepherds work, and where we find ourselves over and over again when life gets a little too hard for us to manage on our own. Look low and we might discover the Word of God scratched out in the dust under our feet in words like Dios. Amor. Natividad.

According to Luke, many years after the birth of Christ, after he died on the cross, after he rose from the dead, when Jesus had just ascended into heaven and his followers were looking for him in the sky, the angels appeared again.

And they said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!"

But that doesn't mean his followers were meant to stand on that hill and keep looking at the sky until the second coming of Jesus. Like them, we are called to go to the places where people are looking for God, and speak in the places where people are listening for God, to walk right up to them if need be to get their attention. We are called to write the Word in the dust if that is what's handy or paint it on the walls or break it in bread and pass it all around.

The Shepherds heard their angel song, and they found their sign in a stable in Bethlehem and then they went out into the world and "they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them." The pattern would repeat itself again and again with each encounter with Jesus. And it still does.

---

<sup>1</sup> Herod died in 4 BCE and Quirinius was not governor of Syria until 6–7 CE. Muddiman, John; Barton, John. *The Gospels* (Oxford Bible Commentary) (p. 143). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.

On this Christmas Day, after the story is told and the bread broken, after we've taken a selfie with Angel Wings in the back vestibule, our best response to the Christmas story is to head out like the shepherds did, and do the same.

Amen.