



Thursday, Dec. 24, 2020
Christmas Eve

Longing for Normal
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Luke 2:1-20 NRSV

In 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.

⁸In 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!"

¹⁵When 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.

When was the last time anything felt normal to you? Probably not in the last nine months or so. Our best-laid plans have been turned upside down:

weddings postponed, vacations rescheduled, school and work life happening under the same roof.

On top of everything, the list of things we've been missing seems to get a little longer every day: a simple handshake or hug, time with loved ones, coffee with a friend, a workout at the gym, sewing quilts, making lefse, gathering around the Christmas tree. And one of the big ones for me: singing out-loud in worship with people like you. And you don't even have to be on pitch! *Normal* has never sounded so good to so many of us.

For the last several months, we've been hearing talk of a coming vaccine. The effort has been dubbed, "Operation Warp Speed." Researchers, scientists, medical personnel, trial participants, government agencies have been focused on a singular goal: to develop a vaccine in as short a time as possible, and without cutting corners. Why? To keep us safe. To give us back our lives again.

And now - in record-setting time - we have a vaccine, and not just one but two. We're prioritizing who gets immunized first: health care workers, the elderly, those with preexisting conditions, those who put their lives on the line for us every day. Hope has arrived! People are getting vaccinated and feeling overwhelmed as they do! We can soon get back to normal again - right?

Well...even with a vaccine, we're being cautioned to not let our guard down. It will take time, a long time, to build up the number of immunized persons so we can have what's referred to as "herd immunity." We'll need to continue to wear masks and practice social distancing; to refrain from handshakes and hugs; to avoid gathering in mid-size, let alone, large-size groups; and I suppose that means very little singing too. I hesitate to say it, but anything approaching *normal* is still a ways off, and to be honest, we're not even sure what that *normal* will be.

If you're a person who's longing for *normal*, I've got a story for you. It's about a young woman named Mary and her fiancé Joseph. Their best-laid plans have been turned upside down too. Things haven't been at all normal for them for the last nine months or so. It all started with a visit from an angel and a larger-than-life assignment for Mary. The angel assures her: "Don't be afraid, Mary. You shall bear a child, and his name shall be Jesus, the Chosen One of God Most High." God has plans for Mary, a lot bigger plans than putting together a wedding and setting up housekeeping in Nazareth. "How can this be?" Mary wonders, "I'm not even married." The angel declares, "Nothing is impossible with God."

Luke takes his time telling this story. He builds suspense. What's going to happen to Mary? What will become of her baby? The cast of characters is

anything but noteworthy: a poor, unmarried couple who can probably sense that the neighbors are talking. There's a trip to Bethlehem, because that's where Joseph's family is from, the family of the shepherd king, David. And the fact of the matter is, the trip could not have come at a worse time.

You know this story. There's no room for Mary and Joseph when they get to town. But the baby is coming anyway, as babies often do. So, the desperate parents find a spot out back where the animals are kept, in a hollowed-out cave or stable. The baby is born. It's a boy. His first bed is a feeding trough.

You should know, as fun as the Live Nativity was at Zumbro last Sunday night, there was very little that was *fun* about the first Nativity. For those accustomed to a comfy mattress and warm water and clean towels, and a little privacy, please, I can only imagine how uncomfortable and disturbing the birth must have been. This can't have felt normal to the young parents.

Still, the baby arrives. Mary sleeps. Joseph keeps watch. But as far as we know, there are no others to help – no family, no midwife, no doctor. The only other humans attending the birth are a band of shepherds.

Granted, shepherds might look and smell pretty good when dressed up for a Christmas pageant, but these shepherds have been living out in the fields among the sheep. They don't even own the sheep. They're working stiffs, doing their best to eke out a living. Luke's cast of characters has gotten even more common and colorful.

Suddenly an angel appears to the shepherds. The word from the angel is the same as the word spoken to Mary months before, "Don't be afraid." Soon the sky is filled with a whole choir of angels. They're singing: "Hope is on the way! There's good news of great joy for all the people. A baby has been born in the city of David: a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord."

What are the shepherds supposed to do? The instructions aren't exactly clear. "This will be a sign for you," says the angel, "you will find a child wrapped up in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." I'm not sure if Mary is ready for visitors or not, but she's going to get some. This is not normal at all.

The next thing we know, these rough-around-the-edges shepherds are on the way to Bethlehem, to visit the newborn shepherd king. And they don't walk as they go, they run. I can imagine the trip going something like this: 1) from the grind of daily chores and to-do lists, they run to new possibilities of life in the Christ Child; 2) from petty grievances that have built up with other shepherds, they run in hopes of patching things up through the Savior; 3) from worries about whether their money will stretch far enough, they run to the treasure of the one called Emmanuel. I suspect that for these and a

hundred other reasons, the shepherds go with haste to Bethlehem. And – did you hear – after the visit is over, they can't stop talking about it. They are the first to share the news with others. Oh, much as we try to turn the Nativity into a cozy bedtime story, there is nothing *normal* about it, not now, not ever.

My friends, you might be longing for *normal* this Christmas. Me too. But I have news for you: you're not going to find it in Bethlehem. You see, God seems to specialize in worlds that have been turned upside down. In a world such as ours, we find ourselves asking, "Is what I believe about God still trustworthy and true? Is my faith strong enough to withstand the challenges I've been facing lately?"

It comes down to trust. We don't know what's down the road. We need trust. If what the angel says is true, there is no place so lowly and earthbound that holiness cannot be present there. There is no situation so broken that God cannot fix it. There is no person – no matter how rough-around-the-edges – who is beyond the love and concern of the God we meet in Jesus.

Appealing though *normal* might be for Mary and Joseph – and for us – there really is no going back after the baby is born. The world has been turned upside down. For all we know, this may have been God's intention all along, to put on flesh and live among us, and point us to a life we never could have dreamed up on our own.

No, this Christmas will not be normal for any of us. But because of it, it might just be a little more like that first Christmas. And we might find ourselves not at the inn, but out back in the stable. We'll be sitting with the shepherds next to Mary and Joseph and a couple of sheep. We'll be wondering, "How can this be?" The answer comes from the angel, "Don't be afraid. God will with you, even when – and maybe especially when – life isn't exactly what you're expecting. You might not be sure what the future holds, but always remember: Nothing is impossible with God." Amen.