

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA**

December 24, 2021 – CHRISTMAS EVE (YR. C)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*God in the Manger—the Extraordinary amidst the Ordinary*”

Isaiah 9:2-7	(A child is born who is Mighty God and Prince of Peace)
Psalms 96	(Sing to the Lord a new song. Proclaim the Lord as King!)
Titus 2:11-14	(God's grace brings salvation to all who will receive it)
St. Luke 2:1-18	(Jesus is born in Bethlehem)

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We live in a world where it takes a lot to get noticed. So many sights and sounds are constantly crowding our senses, it takes something extra bright, twice as loud, and outrageously flashy for us to notice it, let alone pay attention. We drive through neighborhoods and see dozens of homes beautifully decorated for Christmas. But of course, it's the house plastered with thousands of lights, decked out with animated and inflatable figures, so overloaded with kitsch, that we *really* notice. Yeah, that's the place that causes us to slow down and *ooh* and *ahh* in amazement.

We see commercial after commercial on TV and hardly pay attention to any of them. But then one comes along that's weirdly offbeat, or sometimes so incredibly stupid, we can't help but take notice. We've even become blasé about the news, especially all the bad things happening around us. Anyone remember when a mass shooting first made the front page or was top of the news hour? Now, we exhale a sigh born of crisis-fatigue, or raise our shoulders in a cynical shrug. Either way, we've long ago begun to take for granted such ceaseless violence.

In our world today, events have to be bigger, louder, more dramatic and spectacular. They have to attract large crowds in order to be considered successful. Words such as “commonplace,” “mundane,” “everyday,” “routine,” “ordinary”—all perfectly good words—now carry a negative connotation. To be “ordinary” sounds like being a failure. And yet, God chose the most ordinary means imaginable, to come into the world. Almighty God Himself entered life on earth ... *in precisely the same way you and I did!*

In tonight's Gospel, St. Luke recounts a story of commonplace people doing everyday things: A government official decides to take a census in order to tax the citizens. So a couple of peasants, a carpenter and his pregnant wife, are caught up in the migration of people headed to their hometowns for the count. When they get to Bethlehem, the motels are full, so they end up finding temporary shelter in a barn.

Soon after they've settled down for the night, the woman goes into labor and gives birth to her firstborn son, whom she wraps in rags and lays in the animals' feeding trough that's none too clean. Ah, but this is no ordinary baby, no routine birth.

Finally, after hundreds of years, after centuries of a nation longing and yearning for God's anointed One to come, the prophecies have been fulfilled. At last, this is JESUS, whose very name means “God saves.” This is the Christ, the Messiah, the One who will heal the lame, restore sight to the blind, raise the dead, release the oppressed from demons holding them captive, forgive sins, and grant eternal life to all who believe in Him. . . .

The greatest event in the history of the universe has just happened! And yet, His coming was humble, in stark simplicity, without fanfare or hoopla. Even so, a momentous occasion like this could not go unnoticed. The angels of heaven had to tell *somebody!* And to whom do they choose to reveal the greatest news the world has ever heard? A bunch of lowly shepherds out in the fields near Bethlehem . . . *Shepherds!*

These were the first-century equivalent of guys you'd find at an all-night truck stop at 3:00 a.m., or the crew that comes in after hours to clean your office. Decent, hard-working folks—but not the kind the world would venture to entrust with earth-shattering news.<sup>1</sup>

Be that as it may, the shepherds are so excited by the angels' announcement, they rush off to Bethlehem to see the newborn Lord. This grubby bunch of hillside dwellers searches the town until they find Him. Then in awe and wonder, quietly they fall upon their knees before this tiny, helpless baby, God in the flesh, the Savior of the world. They tell Mary and Joseph about the angels' proclamation. In fact, they tell anyone and everyone who will listen.

U.S. Navy Captain Gerald Coffee was a prisoner of war in North Vietnam for 7 years.<sup>2</sup> He particularly remembers Christmas of 1968, his third in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton," because his Vietnamese captors passed out some candy bars. The candy was wrapped in foil, silver on one side, red on the other. Gerald flattened one of the wrappers and folded it into a swan. With another he made a flower, and with a small piece of foil, he created a star. How appropriate, he thought, the star of Bethlehem. He took three straws from the broom in his cell, stuck them into a crack in the wall, and attached these simple, handmade ornaments. There, on Christmas Eve, in the light of the dim, yellow bulb that was always on in his tiny cell, Jerry sat back and looked at his Christmas decorations.

He thought about the simplicity of Christ's birth, and what it meant to him in his own life. It was his faith, he realized, that was sustaining him through his imprisonment. Later, he wrote: "I realized that although I was hurting, lonely, and scared, this was the most significant Christmas of my life."

It was significant for Captain Coffee, and it can be for us, as well. If we seek the truth about Christ eagerly, with joy and anticipation—and, as did the shepherds, look for it in simplicity, quietness, and the ordinary—we, too, will experience the miracle of the Incarnation.

God still takes on human flesh and lives and dwells among us, whenever a kindness is extended for no reason; when one hand reaches out to take the hand of someone who is hurting; whenever forgiveness is gently offered, or an earnest prayer is uttered in trust, however shaky; and when faith comes at the strangest times, and with it, unexplainable hope and peace. . . . *How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.*

If we are open to what God is trying to tell us, as were the shepherds, Christmas will happen in our lives daily, not just on December 25<sup>th</sup>. Jesus is born all over again in every heart that will receive Him. And Christ lives among us in the sacrificial love between a parent and child, or a husband and wife; in a teacher's encouragement of a student; the compassion of a nurse or doctor for a patient; in generosity between neighbors and friends, or toward strangers; and above all, in reconciliation between enemies or persons who have been estranged . . .

And, in a world where it takes a lot to get our attention, if we are not careful, we may miss the One who comes in common quietness. Distracted and preoccupied by what is louder and more obvious, we may miss the One who offers us forgiveness, salvation, and life eternal—Jesus, who is God's own wondrous gift of Himself to us. A gift without price. A gift without conditions. No strings attached! A gift for the whole world, and for all who will accept Him into their hearts.

**Let us pray:** Lord God, You who are life and love, open our eyes, ears, and spirits, just as the angels awakened the shepherds that night so long ago. And, in the midst of all the hullabaloo and glitz of this sinful world, give us the grace to see once more the simple loveliness of Christ, and gladly to affirm Him as our Lord and Savior. Then, grant us the humility to allow You to guide us as You did the shepherds, so that we, too, might "glorify and praise God," telling others of "all that we have heard and seen." O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today. *Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. N. George Hacker, "Are We There Yet?" 24 December 2002. With acknowledgment for inspiration to David A. Tietz <D\_Tietz@compuserve.com > 18 December 2002.

<sup>2</sup> "Captain Coffee: Reaffirming the Invincibility of the Human Spirit," ©2021, [CaptainCoffee.com](http://www.captaincoffee.com) <<http://www.captaincoffee.com>> 13 December 2021.