

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Tonight, we hear the familiar Christmas story. But, for me, the story feels different. The obvious reason is that we're physically in the same place this year for Christmas—we're singing together, we're praying together, and we can see each other's faces. But I think it's... the poinsettias that make it feel different for me this year.

You see, earlier this month, I joined the bishop and other synod leaders to meet with leaders from the Florida-Bahamas synod. I know, woe is me for having a work trip to Florida in December. Anyway. One of the odd things for me was seeing Tampa all decked out in Christmas decorations. I normally experience Christmas with long pants, cold weather, maybe a little snow, and the struggle of keeping the church poinsettias alive. As we were driving around in our shorts in a balmy 70-degrees, that's when I noticed a poinsettia plant in the ground, growing, and it was beautiful! Yes, I knew poinsettias were a warm climate plant, but I guess I never saw one planted in the ground. It got me thinking about the whole Christmas thing and that how I've imagined Christmas to be here in Chicago, as a cis, white, male is soooo mid-western and European. The experience helped me remember how our contexts embody Christmas in different ways.

For example, look at your bulletin cover or the screen to see some ways other people and cultures have taken tonight's familiar story and made connections with their environment and skin type. Or, think about the tradition of Las Posadas in Latin America, where Mary and Joseph travel looking for shelter. Or the similar way we have our migrating Holy Family go between homes finally arriving here tonight.

Or how about the live nativities, or the creche we have here in church. You see, in each of these different representations we are not trying to be historically accurate with our representation. After all, a blue-eyed, white Jesus in a stable isn't really historically accurate. But, again, this story is something more than a history lesson. You see, our gathering tonight is not about sharing a *new* story. Rather it is about how a familiar story of old moves us, changes us, and opens us. It's about how this story can reveal truths about ourselves, our world, and our God just as it has done for thousands of years. It's about how the story of Jesus's birth is not all that different from our story.

After all, like Mary and Joseph, we have seen authorities use laws or decrees to force the movement of people from one place to another. We have seen the impacts of the Indian Removal Act, which required native peoples to take long journeys; the nightly news reveals how decades of governmental failures in central and southern America have led migrants to take long and dangerous trips like the Holy Family; and we see greed and consumption by the rich developed world continue to impact our shared climate which forces the most vulnerable to pack up or perish. So too, the act of laying a sleeping baby in what is available is not foreign. After all, we see images of overcrowded refugee camps, convention centers, and border crossings, requiring vulnerable mothers to swap bassinets for feeding troughs because there is just not enough room. You see, tonight story is not only about something 2,000 years ago. Tonight's story is tonight's reality.

Yet, tonight's story is something more than a border crisis and the control of the powerful. Rather, tonight story is about remembering and experiencing God's presence. There, among those migrant workers, those shepherds, those fieldworkers, it was there that messengers of God, those angels, burst forth. It wasn't in the king's chambers, the oval office, or the Kremlin. Rather, it was in the fields. The first people to hear of the news were those in the shadows. But, still, tonight's story is more than all of that.

The story we recall tonight, well, we embody it in different ways, and we honor it through different traditions. Ultimately, this story is about naming a truth that crosses all cultures, generations, and physical locations. It's a story that acknowledges that the powerful in this world often influence how the masses live, but that our God comes first and foremost to those that the world could care less about. Our God comes among us to abide with those whom the world rejects. Our God is one who understands migration, homelessness, and oppression all too well. Our God knows what it's like to be stuck in an overcrowded place with people who are utterly rude. You see, our God takes on human form to remind us that we don't have a God who is far off in the distance of time or place; rather, we have a God who is here among us.

So, tonight's story is more than a story. It's about yearning to have God's incarnation here and now. And as we experience this holy night that has come alive, maybe what we find is that the incarnation is most certainly here. Maybe in the process of hearing the story it opens our minds to living out the angel's proclamation that the good news God shares is for all without exception. Maybe in the pictures and images of the creche we can feel God's presence a little more closely. Maybe as we seek to understand this story of old, we will come to find that

God is here now. For, God is incarnate in the ways we welcome and support refugees and immigrants. God is incarnate in forgiveness and in radical generosity. God is here reminding you that you are loved, that you are enough, that you are freed to love others in simple and extravagant ways. Because, in the end, God's incarnation is reflected in you and me.

Well, there it is. Yes, it's an all too familiar story. It's story of a screwed-up world with a bleak outlook for those on the margins. And, thankfully, it's the familiar story that when the news seems bleak, well, that is the moment where God shows up to surprise us and remind us "do not fear" for there is "good news of great joy" among us. So maybe that's what feels a bit different this year. Now, I can clearly feel God among us. Merry Christmas. Amen.