

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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It doesn't really feel like Christmas tonight. After all, it's unseasonably warm and the snow has melted. And maybe that's exactly why the Christmas story sounds different this year.

Every year we hear this same story. But every year, something different catches my attention. Some years it's the angels. Some years it's the shepherds. Some years it's the thoughtfulness of Mary.

But this year, it's the contrast Luke sets up so carefully: the Roman Empire on one side, and Joseph's family on the other. One is a world shaped by decrees and domination. Another is a household doing its best to care for bodies that are tired, vulnerable, and on the move.

Luke opened the story with Caesar Augustus issuing an order that reaches into ordinary lives. Bodies were required to move. A pregnant woman had to travel. People complied because empire demanded it. And we know that Luke wasn't especially careful with the historical details. The timeline is messy. The census isn't accurate. Luke is, frankly, a questionable historian. But Luke wasn't trying to give us a historical record. He was more interested in telling us the truth about God and our world.

The truth that empires make life harder for ordinary bodies. The truth that power moves downward and the cost is paid in flesh. The truth that pregnancy, poverty, and powerlessness are never abstract.

That world from 2,000 years ago doesn't feel that distant. We know what it's like when fear arrives, when government overreach disrupts daily life, and when bodies become targets or liabilities. We know it here in Chicago, and Luke names that world without embellishment.

But then—almost quietly—Luke writes, “While they were there, the time came for [Mary] to deliver her child.” You see, God did not wait for the world to stabilize. God did not wait for accuracy or safety or permission. God took on human form. God entered our story through labor and blood and breath. Through a body that needed to be held. Through a birth that was risky and real. God did not arrive above the mess but among it.

And Luke went on to say that “there was no place for [the Holy Family] in the inn,” — but, not because there was rejection of the Holy Family. Rather, the house was already filled because of gracious hospitality. Unknown family from afar had already gathered because of the decree. And, now as the Holy Family arrived, space was made where it could be found. Expectations shifted as these relatives shared their own living quarters. Joseph's relatives took what they had – a feeding trough – to make a crib. And, in those moments, the ordinary care became holy.

You see, God does not wait for our welcome. And God does not wait for us to be ready. What we know to be true is that God always shows up—and that God’s presence changes what happens next.

That’s what the images on the front of your bulletin tell the truth about. Across the top, we see God born amid the devastation of Gaza and the West Bank—where bodies are displaced, lives shattered, and hope feels impossible. Next, we see the 16th century depiction of God born in a ruined church, where faith takes shelter not in grandeur but in what remains. Across the bottom, we see another 16th century example where God is born among every-day life at the top corners— on the right, shepherds are doing what shepherds do, and on the left, soldiers are doing what empires do—but at the center there is birth, love, and life. Finally, we notice God born outside a church in our own region, wrapped in an emergency blanket, wrists zip-tied, and parents in gas masks, all while ICE roams the streets.

These images over the last 500 years are not political stunts. They are confessions of what incarnation has always meant. They speak the truth that the Christmas story has never been simple or silent. They say God always takes on flesh amid a dangerous world. They say that incarnation insists on real bodies within complex systems. And, nevertheless, God becomes incarnate. And because of that, bodies matter. Showing up is important.

Bodies matter when neighbors show up in solidarity with those in fear of ICE raids. Bodies matter when antiracism work means presence, not performance. Bodies matter when grief is met not with answers, but with

presence. And bodies matter when the church changes its own shape to welcome all.

When we gather next Christmas, our building will have been ADA accessible, and we will welcome some known and not-yet-known siblings of faith into the place. This work is not a nice renovation project nor is it a government mandate. This work is a theological confession. It says that some bodies have been excluded—and that exclusion is not neutral. It says that God does not only arrive in able and idealized flesh. It says that God shows up in bodies of all types. This kind of hospitality is not heroic, it is incarnational. It is what happens when grace takes on flesh and dwells among us. It echoes that family home in Bethlehem—a full house of people rearranged to provide welcome and hospitality. A space adapted because God is already there, and a refusal to say, “there’s no room,” when love has been birthed.

This is what is being born among us now. Not solutions. Not perfection. But signs. Signs that God keeps coming. Signs that presence still matters. Signs that love still takes shape in bodies showing up for one another.

Friends, maybe it’s okay that it doesn’t feel all that much like Christmas tonight. After all, that first Christmas didn’t feel “right” either. But, Christmas doesn’t arrive because the world is ready. Christmas arrives because God always takes on human form to reveal love, grace, and welcome. For, Jesus is Immanuel, meaning God-with-us. God-in-the-middle-of-it. God born again—here. Merry Christmas, dear friends. Amen.