

Wednesday, December 24, 2025
Christmas Eve
The Rev. Jack Alvey

Tonight, we gather again to hear a story we've heard so many times. And still, it is a story that ceases to amaze. The baby Jesus is born in a stable. Mary tenderly wraps him in swaddling clothes. Lowly shepherds tend their flocks by night. They watch as an angel appears in the sky to proclaim, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior... Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth." Simple yet awe-inspiring. These are not the circumstances we would expect for the arrival of the Savior of the world. Yet it is the story of how God breaks into the world in a way that turns our ideas of power, leadership, and peace upside down—a message that both those with and without earthly power need to hear again and again.

Notice how Luke begins the story—not with angels or shepherds, but with Caesar. "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." Luke is not just telling us when this happened; he is inviting us to notice the two very different leadership styles at work. Caesar leads by issuing decrees, by controlling his subjects, by saying "because I said so." People move because they have to. Their lives are rearranged to serve the needs of those in power. People are counted and reduced to numbers in service of the empire. Caesar builds his power by taking from others.

God leads differently. God does not stay on a distant throne issuing decrees; God comes near counting himself as one of us, taking on the form of a vulnerable child in a humble stable, where a feeding trough becomes his earthly throne. While Caesar maintains order through force and fear, God brings peace through an abiding, humble kind of love. As we hear this story, we are invited to reflect: what kind of leadership truly brings life and transformation? Caesar's leadership depends on fear tactics. Sure, fear is efficient. It can make people shape up, fall in line, do what they're told, but it cannot change the heart. Fear can modify behavior, but it cannot transform a life. Unlike fear, love takes time, is less efficient, risks rejection, but the power of love never ceases to surprise. This is the same unexpected, transforming love we see when God chooses to enter our world and our lives in a stable. Through Christ, we see that love can do something fear cannot: transform us from the inside out, forming and re-forming us in God's own image. Caesar can control people for a season. But God's love has the power to reshape our hearts forever.

Unlike Caesar, God does not frighten us into obedience; God draws us into a relationship with himself, inspiring trust and love. Into a world shaped by fear, control, and status, God enters—not with power and prestige, but with vulnerability and love. And God does not choose the rich and famous to reveal this good news first, but those who are humble and overlooked. In choosing the shepherds, God reminds us of what Paul writes: "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." God's ways are not our ways. The strong may overlook God, but the humble recognize and receive his promise first.

Notice where the Nativity of our Lord takes place. Not in Rome. Not in Jerusalem. But in Bethlehem, in the city of David. Bethlehem is the place where another king was born—King David. Long before this night, God chose David not for his strength or outward appearance, but because he was a man after God’s own heart. In Bethlehem, God makes clear what kind of leadership God desires: not leadership that exploits others for its own gain, but leadership that seeks and shapes the human heart.

That helps us understand why God chooses the shepherds. Those who hold earthly power are often focused on control, status, and self-preservation, and may not notice what God is doing. But the shepherds—ordinary and overlooked—have nothing to protect and nothing to prove. So Luke turns our attention to the fields where shepherds tend their flocks by night. And it is to these shepherds that the angels sing first. God entrusts them with the promise of Emmanuel—God with us. This is what God’s leadership looks like. It does not elevate the powerful at the expense of the weak. It notices those left out. It lifts up the lowly, even if that means the mighty are cast down. Caesar’s leadership flows top-down, protecting his love of power. God’s leadership flows inside-out, sharing the power of love. And yet even this kind of love—powerful, humble, transforming—is often overlooked, just as the world overlooks the small, vulnerable Christ child.

That is why there is no room for Jesus in the inn—not because the innkeeper is cruel or indifferent, but because the world is full of other priorities. People are busy with registrations, obligations, and the pressures of daily life. We know something about living in a world driven by rules, expectations, and competition. We feel messy, tired, and inadequate—and at this time of year, that pressure only grows. But here is the good news of Christmas: God does not lead the way Caesar leads. God does not wait for our lives to be perfect. God enters the messiness, the exhaustion, and the inadequacy of our lives—right here, right now, in the midst of this season. God does not rule by fear; God rules by love. Just like new parents often say, “I didn’t get an instruction manual for this child,” we discover that following Jesus isn’t about following rules. As someone once remarked, if God wanted the Bible to be an instructional manual, he would have done a better job. Instead, it is about growing in relationship—growing in grace—nurturing Christ in our hearts as he grows within us. God enters this world as a tiny infant, needing only a little room in our hearts, and grows slowly as we care for him with love and attention. Life with God begins in relationship, and as we walk with Christ, we are transformed—not pressured into better behavior, but shaped from the inside out.

The fruit of God’s leadership is seen in how we live: quietly serving, showing up for others, shaped by love rather than fear. Tomorrow morning, some parish families will leave cozy homes to visit the Abbey in Avondale and feed the hungry. There will be no spectacle, no recognition. This is what it looks like to live under God’s leadership—not by lording it over others, but by simply showing up. The gift of Christmas is allowing God to lead us differently, making a home in us. As the collect prayed, “may he find in us a mansion prepared for himself.” God asks not for perfection—only a little room—and when we give it, the Christ child grows in us. Perhaps this is where the story meets us most powerfully. Like

the innkeeper, most of us are not hostile to God. We're simply full. We believe, we care, but our lives are crowded with responsibilities, expectations, anxieties, and good intentions. Just as the stable offered unexpected space for God in this world, even our messy, hectic lives can become places where God surprises us with his presence and peace. The good news of Christmas is that God does not wait for ideal conditions. God comes into crowded lives, messy hearts, and imperfect homes. When we make even a small space—attention, trust, or willingness—God meets us with grace.

So tonight, pay attention to where God may be breaking into your life. Look for God not in the powerful or impressive, but in the ordinary and vulnerable. Perhaps in quiet moments with family, acts of service, or the parts of your own heart you usually try to hide. Remember the baby in the stable, the angels, the shepherds, and the astonishment of it all. May we welcome Jesus with amazement, trusting that he comes not to command us, but to transform us with his love.