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Christmas: Luke 2:1-20  
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Most of us have heard the story many times.

There is a newly married couple traveling to Bethlehem  
They are going to Bethlehem not because they want to  
But because they have to for the registration.  
When they get there, they have nowhere to stay.  
Mary, pregnant with her first child, gives birth.

She swaddles the baby and lays him in a manger while the cows gently moo.  
Then we shift to a field nearby, to tired shepherds with their fluffy sheep  
Tired shepherds who quickly become terrified shepherds  
As they are suddenly surrounded by a whole host of singing angels.  
These now excited shepherds go quickly to Bethlehem,  
Find Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, tell Mary and Joseph  
About what they heard,  
Then go back to their work.

Many of us have heard this story many times.

We can no longer notice what the story says and what we think it says.  
We no longer notice some of the signals embedded in the story  
Simply because our own experience is different.  
And so this story becomes comforting or familiar at best.  
twee or seemingly irrelevant at worst.

So tonight let's take another look.

Let's ask just a couple of questions,  
Let's wonder about the context.  
Let's see this old story in a new way,  
Hoping that different, more relatable good news  
just waiting for us to notice it on the other side.

Tonight's passage from Luke opens by noting that Jesus' birth takes place under the Emperor Augustus, and Quirinus, the governor of Syria.

Joseph and Mary are going to Bethlehem for the registration—  
The registration is mentioned three times.

These admittedly boring details force us to note

the famously oppressive Roman empire, signaling to us that the world  
Jesus was born into was not safe or easy.

For a vast majority of people, to live in the Roman empire  
Was to live with a litany of an intractable, unsolvable problems,  
from state sanctioned violence and terror  
to taxes so high most people could barely  
afford to feed their families.

Statistically speaking, the aforementioned permanently impoverished category

Would have included the newly married couple Mary and Joseph

To further complicate their lives, it seems they may have been ostracized,  
shunned by friends and family, since Mary's pregnancy is scandalous.

Note they are traveling to Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem  
yet no one greets them. No one hosts them.

No women are noted as coming forward to help  
Mary when the time comes to deliver Jesus.

Mary and Joseph are isolated,  
left to fend for themselves.

Being left to fend for themselves is not merely rude. It's dangerous.

Birth was dangerous for both the baby and the new mother.

Infant mortality is high, very high.

Nearly 50% of children die before the age of 5.

Maternal mortality was also extremely high,  
as it has been everywhere for most of history.

After giving birth, Mary takes her baby

And lays him somewhere only marginally  
Better than the floor—a manger.

And then, and then, in this dirty, gritty, smelly non-house, whether a barn or a cave,  
with a flustered, likely older dad, out of his depth,  
and exhausted, first time, scared mom  
Suddenly a bunch of randos show up??

And these onlookers, the shepherds, just look and leave from the family's perspective.  
They offer no concrete assistance.

Those wise people with the gifts, they come later, much later.

These visitors do not seem to have clocked at all  
how precarious this child's situation is.

This first Christmas wasn't very comforting.

It is fraught, and scary, and frankly weird.

Now that I've managed to thoroughly depress all y'all

Now that you're wondering if you should have even come tonight–

THIS feels familiar, doesn't it?

This FEELS familiar, because

we live too in a world with seemingly intractable problems,  
from innumerable public shootings to glaring inequities.

We too live in a world w/ state sanctioned violence.

We too live in a world where

being born in poverty is an  
incredibly, undeniably  
large obstacle.

Like Mary and Joseph, we too live in a world where we are often isolated.

Like them, we fear for the people we love, particularly the younger generations,

Our children and grandchildren

We fear for our own futures and the future of this world.

If we only see the good then, only see the bad now, what do we miss?  
 When we do not or cannot see nuance and ambiguity,  
 When we no longer know how to sit in discomfort  
 When we forget to question the linear narratives of the past  
 we are force fed  
 What do we overlook— and at what cost?

Tonight, on the holiest of nights, **God is inviting us to notice the good in our world too.**  
 I believe we are being invited to wonder **all the things** about noticing,  
 Who, what, when, where, how you notice, we notice, I notice.  
 Where are there signs of goodness that maybe aren't flashy,  
 Signs of goodness that wouldn't really make good content  
 but are nonetheless are **real**, things that make life better,  
 particularly life better for people who most need it  
 To be better?

What **are** those everyday, awesome phenomena  
 we might take for granted because we've gotten used to them?  
 Why have we let the beautiful good get drowned out by the tenacious bad?

Because, y'all, take note: we also live in a world where more and more countries,  
 countries as geographically diverse as Costa Rica and Scotland,  
 That fully power themselves with renewable energy.  
 We live in a world where the Ozone layer  
 is recovering faster than expected,  
 where the Great Ocean Cleanup  
 is going better than expected.

People diagnosed with cancer in the US have a far better chance  
 Surviving and thriving than they did not even a generation ago.  
 Infant mortality has dropped.  
 God bless science, ya'll.  
 Folks, the realest thing I can say to you tonight is this:  
 It might not all be good news,  
 but it ain't all bad, either.

When you leave here tonight, notice the good, too.

Noticing the good too can make all the difference.

Noticing the good too can help us be brave, be generous, be kind,

to be the people we really want to be,

the people we are called to be.

The people we truly are.

Noticing the good too can keep us fighting the good fight,

whatever your version of that might be.

Noticing the good too can be an act of joy, of love, of hope, of resistance.

And once we start, we might notice how much good there actually is.

After all, the good that the shepherds are asked to notice that first Christmas is a baby.

Not the angels' presence, not the angels' song nor the heavenly host.

Instead, the sign of God's presence is a helpless child.

One of the most ordinary miracles in the world

Is what the angels ask the shepherds to notice.

**Notice the good, too.**

**Amen.**

