

Sermon: Luke 2:1-20, Isaiah 9:2-7 © Kate Heichler; Preached at Christ Church La Plata/Wayside
“What Just Happened?” Christmas Eve, Year A; Sunday, December 24, 2022

Come Savior, Redeemer, Christ the Lord. Amen

To pageant participants: Before you go back to your seats,
what was the most surprising thing about this story we just heard?

How about us grown-ups – did anything in that story surprise you?

It can be hard for us to be surprised or shocked anymore.

Global pandemic? What’s new?... Insurrection in America? Why not?

Blatantly racist violence and inequity? The white-bodied are shocked for a moment;
people of color not so much. Tik-tok challenges gone awry? So what.

How could a 2,000 year-old story that we tell every single year surprise us?

But let’s put ourselves in the place of the people we just heard about.

At every stage, they must have said, “What just happened?”

An angel appears, talking, to a young Galilean girl, telling her crazy things are

going to happen to her body and her life – she is to bear a child who will be God?
What just happened?

Same angel talks to her fiancé in a dream, telling him that even though his

intended is pregnant, and he is definitely not the father, marry her anyway.
What just happened?

The young couple, forced to go to his ancestral town for a Roman census,
cannot find a place to stay so she can have this baby – so they hole up in a stable.

Where will we put the newborn? Here’s a feed trough... What just happened?

And let’s not skip over that baby – God deciding to become human, and coming into
the world the way all humans do, as the most vulnerable of creatures, a baby?

What just happened?

Cut to the hills outside Bethlehem, where a bunch of shepherds are keeping watch,
drinking, telling crude stories – that’s the rumor about shepherds.

Suddenly the sky lights up and an angel appears telling them that all the hopes their
people have clung to – for justice, for peace, for restoration and wholeness –
have been made real now, tonight, just over there, in Bethlehem.

And then a whole host of other angels join them singing the most celestial music –
what just happened?

And, not for nothing, to the first people hearing this story, learning that the first people to receive this amazing news were not wise and holy folks, but shepherds? Riff-raff? Rough, crude, smelly shepherds? What just happened?

And we didn't hear this year about those sages from the east, who had seen a star rising and discerned it foretold a new king, and hit the road to find that king, following that star – only to see it stop over a house in Bethlehem.

Stars don't stop. What just happened?

And then they found him, and he was just a baby. What just happened?

What just happened, friends, was that God showed up.

God moved. God acted. And God did not stop, has not stopped.

That baby grew to be a man who made God's life, God's actions visible.

That man healed people, and forgave people, and transformed even molecules, and at every stage – feeding 5,000, walking on water, eating with sinners, people said, "What just happened?"

When that man who was God was arrested, beaten, sentenced and executed, all those who'd put their trust in him said, "What just happened?"

And when, three days later, they found his grave empty and they started running into him – "What. Just. Happened???"

God moved. God acted. We tell this story over and over because of the promise it contains, a promise of purpose, and life; a promise made long before its events, a promise encoded in the words of the prophet Isaiah, words of promise we desperately need to proclaim into our world now.

Isaiah had a word about people who walked in darkness – depressed or overrun by foreign powers, their loved ones put to the sword or exiled.

Ask people in the Ukraine or Haiti or lost in addiction what that kind of darkness feels like.

To them, to us, God says,

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;

those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.

In Christ that light has come irrevocably.

It is so bright, the very sky lit up. And it can never been put out.

Some might say, Really? Looks pretty dark out there to me.
And it is. And It's up to us to be bear that light into darkness.
It's up to us to bring new ways to resolve conflict.
It's up to us to speak of hope to cynicism, joy to despair.

The first thing each one of us can do is to find what gives us joy
and invest our energies in that.
Invest in the things that bring us joy, and sow its seeds all around us –
for joy is an antidote to fear and hatred and power-mongering.
Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit in us, and persists no matter what goes out outside.

We are called to be people of joy, and as we act from that joy,
as we let Jesus work through us in his Spirit, we too will say,
“What just happened?”

We say it all the time around here – every time a prayer for healing is answered;
“What just happened?”

Every time we receive an unexpected blessing; every time we exceed our capacity
and bring blessing to our neighborhood and communities, we say,
“What just happened?”

What just happened? Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
And he's not going away, ever.

Amen.

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"
¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.