

Luke 2:1-20: **Brave**

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Luke 2:1-20 (CEB)

<sup>1</sup> In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. <sup>2</sup> This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. <sup>3</sup> Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. <sup>4</sup> Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. <sup>5</sup> He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. <sup>7</sup> She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

<sup>8</sup> Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. <sup>9</sup> The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

<sup>10</sup> The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you — wonderful, joyous news for all people. <sup>11</sup> Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said,<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

<sup>15</sup> When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." <sup>16</sup> They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. <sup>18</sup> Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.

Brave.

Brave like Mary and Joseph. Like all who bring children into this world, Jesus' parents show incredible bravery.

Luke tells of Jesus' birth so sparingly that we take it for granted. But consider Mary at nine months pregnant, traveling 80 miles from home on foot or maybe balancing on a swaying animal. She and Joseph go to Bethlehem because the political system demands it. They probably try to stay with distant relatives whose house is already full. Or possibly Mary and Joseph get the cold shoulder by family due to an awkward pregnancy without a finalized marriage.

So without mother or sister or midwife, Mary suffers the trauma of labor and delivery in surroundings less than comfortable and surely less than sterile. She places newborn Jesus into a manger, maybe to keep him from being trampled by hooves.

Courageous Mary gets my deepest respect for all that. Yet if she were here she might say that that's just what parents do. They take risks because that is what being alive requires, because to love a child is to give something of your own self for the good of another.

Brave. Brave like those shepherds — literal outsiders guarding their sheep at night, ready to confront predators or thieves. They were *not* ready for a mysterious messenger arriving out of nowhere, surrounded by a night sky blazing more vividly than the northern lights. These hardy, lowly folk receive the surprise that God has good news *for them* — news of a savior, a messiah, a Lord come to them as an infant human lying in — of all places — an animal's feeding trough. So the shepherds do one more brave thing and risk leaving all those sheep, their livelihood. Seeking out this sign of divine hope they run straight into Bethlehem, the city of David, the shepherd king.

Where it's still dark. Mary and Joseph have gotten no sleep, the baby is just learning to nurse, Mary's body hasn't even begun to heal, and already curious strangers, roughly dressed, show up well outside of visiting hours, repeating the news that *this baby* embodies God's peace and salvation for everyone. It's a clue that Mary and Joseph will have to share their beloved child with the world in ways they can't begin to grasp. Mary, exhausted as she must be, pays attention and stores these memories in her deepest heart.

Mary's strength of heart may be one reason God chose her for this mission. She shows courage in the face of life's inherent vulnerabilities and anxieties, and in the face of her own specific risks as an unmarried mother far from home. Theologian Ed Farley would call this risktaking *faithfulness*. Faithful courage enables Mary to live in a dangerous world without grasping for idols like possessions or nationalism or violence or human lords, none of which actually can secure us. Instead Mary moves forward trusting her experience of God's presence, God's word to her, now tangible in the tiny baby at her breast. Grounding herself in God, she finds the bravery to open her heart toward all that will come — the joys and the griefs and the mysteries.

Which makes me look for signs of courageous faithfulness here in your faces. I have heard many of your stories. So many of us this year have faced grief, loved ones dying, diagnoses that scare us, unsatisfying work or no job at all, anxieties of all flavors, broken relationships, financial stress, political fears and frustrations, overfilled lives or underfilled lives, chronic pain, illnesses and addictions, loneliness, wondering where we fit, despair. We — all of us — know in our hearts that life is scary and painful.

Yet God's gift to Mary and to us is the promise of divine presence *in this world*. Jesus' birth reveals God's love wearing a human face and telling us "Don't be afraid. I am with you." When that promise takes root in us it doesn't make our lives painless and safe, but it enables us to see beauty and creativity and love and goodness in this world which God so loves. Christ came to save us from despair, and Christ's love can make us brave.

Brave like the gospel writer. The author of Luke invokes the reign of Roman emperor Caesar Augustus as the context for this story. Caesar who called himself divine lord and savior of the world. Caesar who dominated a huge section of earth through military conquest and who controlled these lands by threat of violence. And by systematically extracting taxes, forcing areas like Judea and Galilee to pay for the oppression and violence visited upon them by Rome.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, Ronald J. "Commentary on Luke 2:1-20." Working Preacher website, 24 Dec 2015: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revISED-common-lectionary/christmas-eve-nativity-of-our-lord/commentary-on-luke-21-14-15-20-14>

Into that world of imperial domination, Luke tells a bravely alternate story. Far away from power structures, in and through the lives of marginalized, exploited people, a divine Lord arrives. No political fanfare. No show of force. The writer subverts Caesar's blustery power by centering the quiet ordinariness of Jesus' arrival.<sup>2</sup> In that world where dominating others politically was as tempting and corrosive as it is in *our* world, Luke reveals a reality that turns Caesar's values upside down. This Lord of peace cries helpless in a Bethlehem manger, the living antidote to empire's shock and awe. Simply telling this subversive story was brave.

Brave like *God*. I have no idea what it's like to shrink your infinite presence in order to become something as limited and frail as a human baby. It can't be easy, though. I do know that human life, as all of us experience it, proves vulnerable at every turn. Jesus, somehow the very being of God come to live with us, walked through the world no safer than you or me. He experienced human limitation and he suffered human pain and human brutality and human death. Those all take courage to face, and Jesus escapes none of them. Even in the face of death, Jesus will show radical trust in God's creative faithfulness. But all that is years in front of him. The night he's born his only tasks are to coo and cry and crave milk and collect love from his parents.

So it's brave of God to put hope in us, to trust humans to participate in this unfolding gift of God's presence. From the shepherds all the way to you and me, God's presence transforms hearts and lives, gathering us into faithful community. God gives us subversive good news to speak, news that in Jesus Christ God is with us and for us, empowering us to be with and for each other even when life can be so hard. Even when oppression looms.

That night in Bethlehem, the savior of the world, the revealer of God's love, started out his life lying in a manger.

Luke mentions [that] manger three times.... That the shepherds greet God incarnate...in the animals' trough points us to the table — Luke [shows us Jesus] in the feeding place. This baby...will be "the bread of God...which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Each time [our] community gathers around this table, [we] remember this [mindbending] mystery: ...God took on human form, lived among us, suffered...died and was raised, that we might know true life, in this world and the next.<sup>3</sup>

God has braved life among us. Merry Christmas, dear people.

In the name of the Giver,  
and the Gift,  
and the Spirit of Welcome.

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<sup>2</sup> Hultgren, Stephen. "Commentary on Luke 2:1-20." Working Preacher website, 24 Dec 2014: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/christmas-eve-nativity-of-our-lord/commentary-on-luke-21-14-15-20-13>

<sup>3</sup> Long, Kimberly Bracken. "Luke 2:1-14: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word Advent Companion: A Thematic Resource for Preaching and Worship*. Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition. pp. 119-120.