

# GO! - BETHLEHEM CALLING

## Advent

Luke 2:1-5

A Sermon Preached by  
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University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington 98125  
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists  
Listen for the word of God.

### **Luke 2:1-5<sup>1</sup>**

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.

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Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

On Christmas Eve it is said that all roads lead to Bethlehem. I'm wondering what's "Bethlehem"? Where's "Bethlehem"? Do you know how to get there? Are you going there? And if you're not going to "Bethlehem", where *are* you going?

Well, you know in the story, the Magi will get to this place called Bethlehem because they'll have studied the stars. And they will have found their place and their way to this place that they never expected to be. And the shepherds, they will get to Bethlehem because they'll be overwhelmed by this experience with angels and they, too, will end up in a place that they never expected or maybe even wanted to be on that very night. And today we consider a story about Mary and Joseph and *their* journey to Bethlehem, who got there because they, too, were compelled and pushed to go to a place they never wanted to go.

And I wonder for you, is there something that you need to do that you don't want to do today? I'm wondering for you and for me, is there something today that you *know* that you need to do or have to face that you don't want to face? And I've just been wondering if perhaps in doing that thing that we don't want to do or facing that thing we don't want to face is, perhaps for us, all this year the way that we're going to find our way to "Bethlehem". And what the heck does that mean?

But that it's in that very place – of doing what we don't want to do and facing what we don't want to face – that Christ *is* there waiting to be born in us and among us today. What do you not want to do?

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<sup>1</sup> The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

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Could you join me in prayer.

God,  
Here we are  
between here and there  
and not always certain about how to get there or even if we want to.  
But, God, open up the possibility that even in this very time and place  
and in these moments of contemplation together  
we may find a way back to our hearts and back to our feet  
and know a step forward to the place where you're calling us to go.  
Help us to find a way – all of us – to Bethlehem this year. – Amen

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So where *do* you not want to go? Or what do you not want to face?

I imagine that there are some of us sitting here this morning – and I just have to ask that question – and you already know. You know right away, oh, my gosh it's *that* conversation I do *not* want to have, particularly on the Sunday afternoon. Or it's perhaps I don't want to have to face going to work tomorrow and what's waiting for me there. Or I don't want to go to school tomorrow and what's facing me there. For some of us know right away what that thing is that we do not want to do. For others of us I imagine that we ran immediately to all of the externals in our lives. In other words, we've got news that we don't want to face and we know what to do with – and that's compelling us into a place that we don't want to go to.

Now you know there are lots of externals in our lives that compel us to go to places that we don't want to do. One of those big ones is called parents. *Parents!* Oh, my gosh the power of that parental voice, right? I hear that still. It's been *years* since I've lived the home. But I can still hear my folks saying, "Peter! What are you doing! You shouldn't be doing that!" Money! Money is a big one for some of us here, I know this morning. And it's money because money is security, and security is drawing us to go to places that perhaps we don't want to go and do stuff that we don't want to do, because we need be secure and make a secure place for us and our families. And illness and death. Oh. Illness and death compel us to go to places that we would choose not to go to or face.

For some of us, I imagine, we went to an interior place and we thought of that "call". I mean, we thought of that thing that we know we really need to do if our lives are going to grow and move forward, but we keep pushing it aside and we hear it again and again right in here. And if you're like me, you, too, might take preference preference in the place of saying, "Well, I don't really know what I don't want to do. And I really don't know what I do want to do. I'm just confused. And I take refuge in my confusion, because confusion is a much better place to be than actually knowing what I do know what I don't want to face." What do you not want to face? I mean, none of us want to be pushed, right? None of us want to be pushed into the place of doing the thing we don't want to do. But sometimes we are and then what do you do? Well, just ask Al Franken.<sup>2</sup> Just asked Trent Franks.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Stuart Franken, U.S. Senator, Minnesota, 2009-2018, Democratic-Farmers-Labor Party (Democratic party affiliate)

<sup>3</sup> Harold Trent Franks, U.S. Representative, Arizona (8<sup>th</sup> District), 2003-2017, Republican Party.

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Just ask John Conyers<sup>4</sup> this morning. What you do when you've been forced to do something this week that you did not want to do, but because of behaviors – your sexual harassment or sexual violence against women – that have compelled you to do and be in a place that you don't want to be – joining how-many-other powerful and prominent men this past month since we've last been together who were all in places that they did not want to be – and out of work and out of a job and out of that place of power and privilege and into a place of disempowerment and wondering what the heck happened. What you do when you're they are? What do we do? What did you do when you were there?

Just ask 200,000 people in California this morning who woke up in beds that were not their own. What do you do? Forest fires that are driving people from their homes, joining them with millions of other people throughout the world. We know some of their names: Rohingya, Syrians. So many people throughout the world waking up this morning in beds that are not their own and in places that are not their homes. What you do?

There're others of us – we know too well today – who have been pushed in our lives in places of illness and death and facing things that we don't want to. But there we are. And, in fact, I think today we ought to get a good look around each other and say and it's *all of us* in some way. It's so many of us in our country. It's so many of us in a world. And I know it's so many of us in this congregation say, "The way things are in the world are not the way I want them to be. They're not the way I hope them to be. They're out of text out of step, out of touch with my values, with my commitments to who I *believed* I was, who I *believed* our country was, but not that way anymore." So perhaps it's no surprise that we find our places in places again of anxiety and fear and rage, because we do not like to be in this place that we do not want to be and we're here. And what do you do with being here, where you don't want to be and stepping forward into going where you don't want to go?

Well, sometimes I find refuge in that place: of thinking about stepping into what I have to do that I don't want to do, and I get to be back in that great comfortable place I do like sometimes called *resentment* or *gripping*. Do you like to gripe? Oh, I *love* to gripe! Do you like to be resentful? Oh, I *love* to be resentful. I do. And I believe there is a place, a good place for good gripping and good resentment. Oh, my gosh! So important! But the biggest reason when I really push it, why do I like gripping so much is because when I gripe I know who I am. And I'm right here and I'm not where *those* other people are. Or I divide myself up: I am *not* that kind of person. I'm not that; I'm this. And I split and split and split. I love gripping because it places me; I know who I am. And to step into the place of where I do not want to go sets me into the *fear* of who, then, the heck am I? Who am I when I'm pushed into the place of that place?

You know, I think we could read the whole Advent story as a whole story of a bunch of people that got to Bethlehem because they had to go to a place they didn't want to go to. That's the imagination of Matthew and Luke. They said Jesus – no matter what the historians say about where Jesus needed to be born – Jesus had to be born in the place that nobody wanted to go to. He had to be in Bethlehem. Why? Because we get Jesus to Bethlehem. We get all of these people out of their comfort zone and into their un-comfort zone of being in a place where they didn't want to be and seeing things that they never saw before and Jesus is revealed.

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<sup>4</sup> John James Conyers, Jr., U.S. Representative, Michigan, 1965-2017, Democratic Party.

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In fact, if we get Jesus to this place we didn't want to go to called Bethlehem, there's the possibility that we might get it. We really might see it. We might see it, that this Jesus is connected to all of that other begats and lineage. He is connected *all* to those prophets and apostles in the whole long line. Jesus is part of that. It names him for who he is, born there in the City of David – not in the outback of Nazareth, but in the City of David. *That* shows who Jesus is. And the other thing, it shows what Jesus means. You know, people are going to be talking about this Jesus as the Prince of Peace. Well, great! Let's place him in the story right there, up against Caesar Augustus, who is called, everybody calls him the Bringer of Peace. Well, let's make the contrast really big: the Bringer of Peace and Jesus, the Prince of Peace. What kind of peace do you really want? But to get to that place, everybody has to go to the place they don't want to go so that they can see.

Rosamund and Ben Zander in their book *The Art of Possibility* talk about it like this. They say we spend most of our lives, in fact 99% of our lives, in the world of measurement, right? We want to get from here to there. And we know what we want to get from here to there and what we need. We need enough money. We need enough time. We need enough love. We need enough security. We need all these things and then we'll find ourselves eventually to this place. And we resent all along the way the things that keep us from getting to that place we want to be. It's how we live and it's why we live most of our lives in a lot of anxiety.

But they say there's another way to live and we all live there *some* of the time. And the invitation of the season is we live there *more* of the time: we live in the possibility of "Bethlehem". And "Bethlehem" is this. It's when I finally put down all of my trying to get ahead and be ahead and go ahead, and I look around, and I see what *is*. I don't know about you, but I miss it all the time. In all of my trying to get somewhere, I miss what *is*. In all of my saying and fussing about "I don't want to be here," "I don't want to do this," "I don't want to face this," I miss everything that's right here! Are you missing what's right here?

You know, in all the words and all the news about Jerusalem this past week has just set me back remembering 16 years ago. Some of us remember that Christmas 16 years ago. It was right after 9/11. And in 9/11 the world like – bam! – changed, and for some of us dramatically changed. And things we thought about security, and things we thought about safety, and things we thought about neighbors. All these things just changed. There was an incredible amount of fear.

And at that time I was co-leading a delegation from our congregation and Temple B'nai Torah to go to Israel and Palestine. Now, we planned this trip for a year. We had a Jewish-Christian congregation going on this trip. And we almost cancelled our trip. Of course! Reasonable people would cancel the trip. It's too scary. It's too dangerous. You don't know what's going to be happening to you as an American there. You don't know. Lots of insecurities. But over the fall we had conversations and a lot of one-on-one conversations. And people said, "Even though this is really scary and I don't want to do this thing, I know I *have* to do this thing. You know, no one is forcing me to do this. But I need to go there to listen to everything, to listen to all these people in this land of such trouble in turmoil, and what a better place to go than right now?" And we signed up again one by one by one, and we had enough people to go. And right a few weeks from now, we were standing there outside of our little van to go through the checkpoint to get from Jerusalem into Bethlehem.

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Well, the world had changed. I'd been there two years before. Dave and I lived there one summer right on the border between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. And there was a little stone wall that divided the two places between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. And literally people walked through the stone wall. All the Palestinians coming to work – hundreds of people a day – just walked through the little stone wall, and we would walk through the little stone wall the other way to go to Bethlehem. Because this was a long while ago, I used to go to Bethlehem to get my haircut.<sup>5</sup> Oh! Great barber in Bethlehem. We used to go to Bethlehem to go to the pub, to go eat ice cream. It was right there. Just wander through.

But this time the world changed. And there was a wall. There was no a longer stone wall but there was a *huge* wall. And outside there in a little van the Jewish members of our group were *terrified*. They were *terrified* about going to Bethlehem, because they didn't know what was going happen to them. They didn't know if they were going to be safe, or if it was going to be safe.

Well, we came through. And we spent three nights in Bethlehem. We all stayed in people's homes. We were all divided up from each other. It was cold. It was snowing. We all had these little gas heaters in our rooms. And we were warmed by an incredible hospitality in Bethlehem that I will never ever forget. In all of our fear, in all of our anxiety, we were warmed by the people of Bethlehem who just met us as we are. And our eyes were opened –

Beyond: “These are good people,” “These are bad people,” “We agree with these people,” “We don't like these people.”

To: “Look at these people,” “Look at these people!” And “Look at this place!” And “Look at us! Oh, my gosh!”

And for a moment in time we were in “Bethlehem”. We were in the land and the place of possibility, of everything that is *right* here. And in that place, we knew exactly what we needed to do and not needed to do. We knew who we were.

And we went home.

And it was months and now it's years later and we forgot! We forgot about “Bethlehem” and we forgot about what we saw and knew at that time. Of course, we did. And it's why we all have to go back to “Bethlehem”. And I wonder if it means taking a step to the very place and doing that thing we don't want to do to get there, because in that place there's the very possibility that we, too, might just see everything that is here.

I just came back to church this week on Wednesday [from a leave] and started back. I had an amazing, amazing month away. I really got to be in the world, be in my body, be in Life in a whole different way. It just fed me, fed me, fed me. I came back to work – and came back to so many familiar patterns of all of the rest of my life, right?

And I came back and went, I'll just go back to be the old way it used to be, because it's much more comfortable, right? But instead, I had just enough awareness and wisdom to say, you know, I like that other way I was. So I asked my friend Larry, I said, "Larry, I want to step into uncomfortable. I want to find my way to Bethlehem. And I want to be and do some things in some different ways. And they're

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Ilgenfritz's hairline has receded in the many years since.

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going to be uncomfortable, because I'd rather go back to my comfortable ways. And I want to report to you every Friday: Am I doing it? Am I stepping into *my* discomfort? And am I seeing? Am I just seeing in some new ways?"

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So, I wonder for you, what you have to do that you don't want to do? What do you have to face that you don't want to face? And what if there's the possibility that that's your way that you get your way to "Bethlehem" this year and find your way to Christmas? I mean, what's one step you can take today? What's one little step you can take today to step into that? And who can you look around and just find at your side – because you can't go there alone – who can keep you accountable to say "I took that step and I'm going to that place." And can we look around at each other and just say a plan to prayer here that all of us this year all of us to share my try in some little or big way to find our way to "Bethlehem", because the possibility of what is there, of what is this, is immense. And the world, the world is waiting and needs us to sing that song of hope and joy and love. It's everywhere. It's here. L

Let's find our way. Let's go to Bethlehem. — Amen

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