

## In Those Days

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“And it came to pass in those days...”

In those days, a law came out from the government, that all resident non-citizens had to be registered.

In those days, a young couple, far from their home because of economic upheavals and unexpected taxes, found no place to stay, because there was no room for them in the shelter.

In those days, men who belonged to the class of the working poor were out at their job, late at night, doing work that nobody else wanted to do, but they *had* to do because they were too poor to choose otherwise—working late at night while their more prosperous and more comfortable neighbors were at home asleep in their beds.

In those days, a young woman who was engaged to be married, and who was already pregnant, was wondering what would happen next, was wondering about this baby, who was certainly a miracle and certainly a joy—but who was also unexpected, also something she’d never planned on, also something that changed her life entirely. A young woman was wondering what would happen next, fear and doubt and faith all crowded together in her heart.

In those days, a young man, an up-and-coming skilled artisan, who had a good career ahead of him, and who wasn’t accustomed to being thrown out on the street because there wasn’t room in the shelter—a young man who was about to become a father even though he knew he wasn’t the father—a young man wondered where he fit into this upside-down world that was confronting him, a young man wondered if he could make this marriage and this family and this *life* really work, and fear and doubt and faith all jostled together in his mind.

In those days, Bethlehem was occupied by soldiers, who kept the “peace” by keeping the people on a very short leash, their lives and their actions controlled and curtailed, their hope and their freedom all but taken away.

In those days, the world was spinning on, as the world always seems to do, without caring much about the people struggling in it.

And in those days, suddenly everything stopped: right in the middle of all the goings-on, right in the middle of all the chaos and commotion, an angel of the Lord appeared, and the Word of the Lord was spoken, and peace was proclaimed for God’s people, and a child was born in a stable, and a new life—God’s life—came to be with us all.

In those days...

It all sounds pretty familiar, doesn’t it? We all recognize it as the Christmas story, “those days” two thousand years ago when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, a troubled sub-state of the Roman Empire, enmeshed as ever in imperial politics, just about the *last* time and place anyone would expect to find God breaking through to be with us.

But it sounds a lot like *our* story, too, doesn’t it?—“these days,” when politics and economics and poverty, when armies and insurrections and occupations, when fear and doubt and faith all jostle together around us, and we can’t help but wonder what will happen next.

The Christmas story is *our* story, too—and the good news of this story is that right in the middle of all *our* goings-on, right in the middle of all *our* chaos and commotion, God comes to *us*, with the message of peace, with the promise of light, with the birth of new life in us and in our world.

One of the things that has always struck me about the Christmas story is the way it is a mass of contrasts: there is squalor, and there is splendor. There is the stinkiness of the stable, and the aurora of angels. There is the violence of the Roman imperial overlords, and the peace proclaimed to God's people on earth. There is the exclusion of the "socially unacceptable" shepherds, and the utter and ultimate inclusivity of God's love. There is the way Mary and Joseph are pushed off to the sidelines of things in the stable, and the way the birth of Jesus makes that stable the very center of the world. The Christmas story Luke tells us is a mass of contrasts.

And I think that is why the story has such power for us; that's why we keep coming back to it year after year after year: because *our* stories are masses of contrasts, too; and Luke's story tells us that it is precisely into those contrasts that God's embodied love always comes. God's love isn't just for the pious and the perfect, God's grace doesn't come only in moments of quiet contemplation, when everything else is all wrapped up and all settled down and all put to bed—but God's love breaks in on us precisely when everything else is going on, precisely when everything else is chaos and commotion, precisely in those days when it is the *last* time and place we would expect God's love to be: in the emergency room, in the homeless shelter; where people's hearts are breaking, where people are struggling for justice; in the choice between war and peace, in the decision between generosity and greed; in the moment of love when everything seems loveless, in the flash of hope when everything seems hopeless, in the sudden joy that breaks through even the deepest sorrow.

It is precisely into these contrasts that God's love comes, just as it did in a stable in Bethlehem; and suddenly the world is hushed, and the chaos pauses for a moment, and the angel appears, and the heavenly chorus sings, and the Savior is there, and new life begins. That is the story of God's Incarnation; those are the days in which God's love is embodied for us.

In those days, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David, to be the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. And in these days, Jesus is borne in us, right here in the middle of things, to be our Savior, to share God's life with us, so that we can share God's life with the world.

That is the Christmas story we celebrate here tonight. And that is the Christmas good news we can live this day, *these* days, every day. Amen.