



## Sermon for December 24

One of the commentaries I read on this text spoke of friends from seminary who were unable to have children of their own. They were preparing for the adoption of a child from a different part of the world. The social worker told them that they must prepare to be a “conspicuous family.” These friends were quite surprised by the label. The social worker went on to explain that there would always be people staring at them, trying to figure out the backstory. They would not be able to blend in easily. For better or worse, they would draw attention.

There is nothing conspicuous about the birth of Jesus. Joseph and Mary blend in with others. There is nothing about his birth that would draw the attention of those around them. They travel to Bethlehem because of the census. Joseph and Mary find a place to stay. The fact that there was “no room at the inn” seems an afterthought. It wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. The rooms were booked so they stayed elsewhere. It is in that place that Jesus is born. Mary, Joseph, and the newborn Jesus are there, apart from others. There is no mention of a midwife, or anyone else to help. Maybe because there wasn’t anyone there, or maybe because the birth itself was quite unremarkable, or rather, inconspicuous.

It is what happens next that sets this scene apart from others. There is an announcement to the shepherds who were gathered in the fields watching their flocks at night. These shepherds are told about the birth and journey to see this holy family, gathered around a manger. From that point on, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus become a very conspicuous family. There are whispers wherever they go. Some positive, some negative. They can no longer blend in. Life is forever changed.

Jesus’ ministry was the same way. Jesus did not hang out with “churchy” people. Jesus spent time with those on the fringes. We walked around with fisherman, zealots, and a tax collector. He gathered crowds wherever he went. This drew attention, not only because of a crowd, but who was all in that crowd. Jesus was intentional about being conspicuous. There was no desire to blend in. There was a deep desire that everyone knows that they are loved by God.

That is the beauty of the incarnation. God came near, in this child, to not only walk among us, but to break the stereotypes of organized religion. God came near to remind us of God’s love for all. God’s love is not only for those within the church, or who look and sound a certain way. God’s love breaks down boundaries until all know that they have a home in the presence of God.

This gathering here is the point of Christmas. Yes, we get to light candles and sing Silent Night, and that is beautiful. We also get to gather. Here. Together. Where else in the world do you see such a hodge podge rag tag group of sinners in the same place. Where else do you see people of differing beliefs, different economic status, different gender expressions, and any other divide we create, gathered in one place? To the world, we are a conspicuous family. This gathering defies cultural norms. This gathering sticks out when compared to the way our culture places people in categories and tries to get us to see one another as competition, or worse yet, as enemy.

These divisions have always existed. It does not have to be. Tonight, we gather around this manger scene and lean into the audacity of faith. If this baby can break down barriers and bind people together, maybe we can find a sense of belonging with each other too. If this baby opens the eyes and hearts of those within a system to reach out and welcome those on the fringe maybe we can too.

Tonight, set it all down, the worries, the fears, the differences, those things that divide us. Set them down. Enjoy being here, in this conspicuous community, and know that you are loved by God. God has come near, for you, and for all. Amen.

Pastor Michael Schmidt