

I grew up going to Connecticut every Christmas. My mom grew up there and her sister and parents lived there. It was a long way from Regina, Saskatchewan CANADA where I was growing up, but every Christmas for the first years of my life we would fly all that way to spend Christmas with them.

I don't remember a single present I got those years, but I remember the warmth I felt walking into the house. I remember the feeling of safety. I remember laughing with Grampa, tinsel on the tree, and Nana introducing me to both eggnog and Coca Cola - I spent the rest of that particular Christmas asking for coco nog.

Many Christmases have since come and gone. Nana and Grampa have since died and what was their home has been renovated and expanded - changed. What was is no longer. But it remains too, standing from a distance.

The story we celebrate tonight is laden with distance. “In those days” - a long, long time ago: We hear it from a distance. People with power decree that all the world should be registered. The familiar distance between the powerful and the rest of us is pronounced. And at this decree, Joseph and Mary have to travel 90 miles by foot to Joseph's hometown to be counted.

Bethlehem. 900 years before, it had been the hometown of King David who reigned over the “golden age” of Palestine - long before Rome had laid siege and occupied these lands. Now, Bethlehem was a backwater town on the fringes of the Empire in a province generally ignored by the powerful. Now, far from Bethlehem, the powerful have spoken and the powerless start walking.

Joseph and Mary traveled far but they knew a different distance from the long ago histories and the many miles. They were engaged to be married, but Mary was already pregnant - expecting any day now to have a baby. This was a desperate young couple with a mandate by distant rulers and a baby on the way. Theirs was a distance between the way lives were supposed to unfold (according to the Law) and the way their lives were unfolding. Theirs was a distance between the way things are and the way they ought to be.

We know such distances too, don't we? Maybe it's the distance between the way we'd hoped our lives would go and the way it has gone. Maybe it's the wide expanse between who we are and where we'd like to be. The world itself seems far from the world we once knew and the world we hope for: Between Covid, the battle for Ukraine, economic worries and consequences, and the seeming evaporation of any sense of control, we barely recognize it. And amid the world's turning, our own lives bare the marks of distances in relationships, in histories, in the courses of our lives, in our hopes and dreams and daily realities. Struggle is the sign of the daily distances we know.

Life as a shepherd is full of such struggle. At the time, wealth was measured in livestock. But these men, living in the fields, watching their flocks by night, did not own these sheep - they were hired hands doing undesirable, and shameful work, likely to make ends meet. What might have been the distances standing watch with them that night?

I think, perhaps like the shepherds, we look at our lives and the life of the world in terms of the distance between us and God. The gaps and miles fill with God-sized questions: Does God care about any of this, any of the pain, any of the challenges facing us? Does God care about me, my life? Where is God in all this? We feel all our distances and, maybe with these shepherds, far from home, we wonder.

“Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.” Suddenly, in brilliant light, the distance vanishes, the expanse collapses. “Good news of great joy” is given with the words, “To you!” “To you is born this day!” Right now, just there, “a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

An angel sent by God has stepped into the gap, “Do not be afraid.” “To you!” we hear. In the face of this closeness, this immediacy, we need these words. As used to our distances as we are, it’s scary. Face to face with this closeness, the question rises: What shape now does my life take?

As the shepherds were drawn, so we are drawn across our distances: The words “go, see, haste, found, saw, amazed” now fill in the gaps. The distance has been closed - Emmanuel, “God-with-us”, has come: Christ the Lord, one of us - to know all our distances and to cross them for our sake, to reach us and this broken world God so loves.

The birth of Jesus is God’s decisive answer to the questions all our distances pose: Yes, God cares about this world, about your life and what you face. And where is God in it all? Right here, before you, where you least expect God to be. In the face of this child, the presence of God in our lives and in the world is made known. In the face of this child, we hear the good news. “I see you, I love you. I’m with you, I’m for you.”

AMEN