

Christmas Eve 2021

Luke 2:1-20

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I was standing in a store this past week, 4th in line behind a customer with several packages to be gift-wrapped. The clerk behind the counter was meticulous in caring for each item, swaddling each present in tissue paper, tucking it gently into a box, cutting the perfect size sheet of Christmas paper, slowly taping the ends, asking the customer for the preferred color of ribbon, then measuring the length of ribbon and tying it precisely. I wasn't in a rush, so initially I thought, "I really admire how centered the clerk is, how unhurried, how focused. Wow, this is a great exercise in patience for me. I always need practice."

As the amount of time grew, I hoped that this one transaction would mercifully soon be over. And again I silently admired the clerk, unflappably completing the wrapping job, unconcerned about a couple more people who had entered the store and were now also waiting in line. I thought, "Gee, if I were behind that counter, I'd be sweating by now, bracing for the complaints to begin." The first customer left and the clerk served the second: methodically, calmly, slowly. By the time that transaction was over and the third customer was up to bat, so to speak, I was imagining someone behind me losing it and starting to shout, "I can't take it any more! Pick up the pace, for heaven's sake!" And then my turn came. Phew.... My packages got the same careful attention everyone else's had. I deferred gift-wrapping of the last couple presents, in consideration of my own schedule and the emotional well-being of the people behind me in line.

We're not really used to people taking their time, are we? Especially in the midst of the holiday/holyday crunch, most of us are racing around at warp speed. Often I feel bad

about that, wishing I could be more chill and take things slower. But I and all of us who have hustled/bustled through this last month and maybe even arrived breathless tonight have good company in the first couple chapters of St. Luke's Gospel. This year, maybe for the first time, I really noticed the words "went with haste":

[After the angel Gabriel visited her,] *Mary set out and **went with haste** to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.* (Luke 1:39-40)

[Then after Jesus' birth, shepherds] ***went with haste** and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.* (Luke 2:16)

*The Message* paraphrase says that *Mary didn't waste a minute* going to see Elizabeth, and the shepherds *left running* [from their fields and flocks] to see the newborn Savior.

Maybe we could say they were all in "a good rush," kinda like Representative John Lewis encouraged people of faith to get into "good trouble" to protest injustice and pave the way for the kingdom of God. "Good rush," "good trouble," seem like contradictions in terms. But sometimes we **need** to be in rush. I remember the car ride to the hospital with my sister who was in labor with her first child. Our father was driving, and our midwife stepmom was next to him in the front seat. It was a brutally hot July day and our mom, knowing how Dad always ran the engine for at least 5 minutes before turning on the AC, got into the car and demanded, "Turn on the air conditioning, now!" She was in a good rush to keep the laboring mother cool, and my Dad was in a good rush to get his daughter safely to the hospital.

Some of you told me you went to the theatre to see "The Messengers," this year's full-length Christmas special for the crowd-funded series *The Chosen*. Others of us have watched it on-line or on-demand at home. In an early scene we see immensely pregnant Mary seated side-saddle on a donkey in a very crowded square. Joseph is explaining to her

there is no room in the inn, except the lame offer of space in a stable, so he's going to keep looking for lodging. She winces with what we're sure is a labor pain, and tells him, no, there's no time to look further. They need to be in a good rush to find shelter and prepare for the Baby's imminent arrival. In one of the most poignant scenes, we see the young couple enter a barn and settle in. Mary decides the trough for the animals' feed will be her Son's first crib, and she lovingly cushions it with a clean blanket she's brought along. Joseph busies himself with an obviously necessary task that never occurred to me: he sweeps away manure from the floor of the barn-turned-birthing-room.

That detail got me. With the beautiful images of the Nativity we see on greeting cards, we could imagine a quiet, starlit, pine-scented scene, with carols quietly playing in the background. Not so! Despite a very funny TikTok video (by Adrian Bliss) called "The Queue for Baby Jesus," in which an angel tells the animals who **live** in the stable that they can't **enter** the stable without a present for the Baby Jesus, we do not really believe the animals were evicted on the night our Lord was born. Actually, the place got more and more crowded, not more and more empty! First Mary & Joseph, then the Baby, then the shepherds.... Standing room only!

As we mentioned earlier, the shepherds were in a "good rush" to meet and greet the newborn Child. Early in December our Lutheran/Roman Catholic group viewed and discussed *The Chosen's* Christmas special from last year, entitled "The Shepherds." In it we saw a lame shepherd with bandaged leg and homemade crutch take the lead and move quicker than we thought possible to be the first to arrive at the stable and "*see this thing that [had] taken place, which the Lord [had] made known to [them].*" (Luke 2:15) The lame

shepherd moves from fast walk to uncertain jog to full-out run, throwing away the now-unnecessary crutch along the Way! In his “good rush” to the manger he is healed.

Others in the Bible are in a “good rush” and find blessing: when unexpected visitors come to Abram & Sarai’s tent in the desert, Abram **rushes** to find his wife, then directs her to **quickly** bake some bread for the visitors. He then **runs** to their herd, chooses a calf, and gives it to a servant to prepare **fast** for the guests, who turn out to be angels and promise that by the time they return the following year God will have blessed their gracious hosts with a son.... (Genesis 18:5-7, 10) That’s the story referred to in the letter to the Hebrews (13:1), which says:

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,  
for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

What a great reminder that we should always be in a “good rush” to welcome others, as Mary & Joseph welcomed shepherds, strangers, to adore the Child in the manger. We should always be in a “holy hurry” to see and serve our Christ.

Dorothy Day, a 20<sup>th</sup> century woman of faith known for her deep, where-the-rubber-meets-the-road love of the poor, wrote a beautiful reflection called “Room for Christ.” She says we haven’t missed the boat by being born 2,000 years after the Lord Jesus, by not having walked the earth at the same time He did. She says we have the same chance to “make room in the inn” as the innkeepers in Bethlehem had when Joseph arrived with Mary riding side-saddle on their donkey, Mary who clumsily dismounted and then waddled into the stable and prepared a manger as a bassinette because there was **no** room for them in the inn.

Day reminds us that whatever we do for the food pantry to help parents desperate to feed their children, whenever we invest energy in the Bike Ride for Food Justice (God’s

Hands/Our Wheels), whenever we invest the precious gift of time in visiting the lonely who are hungry for company, or drop off a meal or run to the pharmacy or offer a ride to a doctor's appointment for someone who is sick, whenever we cook dinner or fill a white bag with toiletries for temporarily homeless Family Promise guests or donate a coat to the working poor in town or pass along a bike or housewares to newly arrived refugees served by I-RISE or donate a mattress to a veteran or permanently disabled person who has reached out to the Furniture Bank or reached deep in our pockets for tornado victims searching for hope in an apparently hopeless situation, whenever we take a tag from the Giving Tree to donate a toy or adopt a goat or a beehive for God's Barnyard, perform any act of kindness, share any blessing, put ourselves out in any way for others, we do it for Christ. "And whenever you did it to one of these, the least members of My family, you did it to Me." (Matthew 25:40)

There are still people looking for room in the inn, still stables that need to be cleared of manure, still many holy tasks we should be in a "good rush" to perform, in the name of Emmanuel, God-with-us, born long ago in Bethlehem and still with us today. Amen

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