

**Wednesday, December 24, 2025**

**Christmas Eve**

Luke 2.1-20

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

### **“Risky Business”**

On this most holy of nights, we gather, as in years past, as the faithful have done century upon century, to celebrate the most important and significant event in the course of human history. We heed the call of our opening hymn: “O Come, All Ye Faithful.”

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,  
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem!  
Come, and behold Him, born the King of angels!  
O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!

We celebrate this joyous event by creating a veritable feast for the senses. As we hear joyful songs describing the birth of our Lord; as we hear the only recorded account of what transpired that night in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago. As we look with adoration upon the creche, with its depiction, sanitized though it may be, of the event we celebrate; as we gaze at the candles burning all around us, symbolizing the light that has come into the world, overcoming the power of darkness. As we smell the scent of incense and the Christmas greens and flowers, reminding us of the new life born into our midst—a life that is at once fully human and fully divine. As we taste the bread and the wine at Eucharist, reminding us of the ultimate purpose of the One we celebrate this night. As we feel the embrace of friends and loved ones as we wish each other Merry Christmas. All so celebratory. While new and exciting in many ways, because we only do this once a year, it is also very familiar and comforting. What we have come to expect of our Christmas celebrations.

Regarding our familiar and comforting annual celebration of Christmas, Anglican clergyman and Bible translator J.B. Phillips writes, “The towering miracle of God’s visit to this planet on which we live will be glossed over, brushed aside, or rendered impotent by over-familiarity.” He goes on to add that, “Even by the believer the full weight of the event is not always appreciated.”

For in the familiarity of our annual celebration—which, don’t get me wrong, I would not change a single thing—but in the familiarity, have we become inured to the reality of what happened that night in Bethlehem? Have we become so used to the image of a beautiful baby being adored by loving parents, surrounded by cute and cuddly animals—yeah, they were far from that—with choirs of angels proclaiming “Glory to God in the highest heaven,” with shepherds dropping everything to go adore this newborn Messiah, just as we have momentarily dropped our holiday celebrations to come and adore him, Christ the Lord; have we become so used to all of this and more, that we fail to grasp the deeper significance of what we witness, of what we celebrate? Of what this truly means.

What we witness and celebrate this night is but the culmination of nine months of planning and anticipation. Actually, even more than that. For the nine months of Mary’s pregnancy was just

the final part of the process before Jesus' birth. This is the culmination of God's plan that has been in the works for literally God only knows how long. Likely from the beginning of creation. A plan that would, if successfully executed, result in the salvation of all humanity. The salvation of all humanity being the most complex, audacious project in all history. The implementation of which would entail the most complex and audacious planning and buy-in from God, a teenage girl in Roman occupied Palestine, and her fiancé. What could go wrong? Despite being pulled off without a hitch—witnessed by the fact that we are here 2,000 years later—this plan and its implementation was not without its risks. In fact, there was a lot of risk involved. Risks that are worth considering if we are to more fully appreciate and understand why we are here tonight.

Going back to the Annunciation, when the Archangel Gabriel came to Mary to announce that God had chosen her to give birth to God's Son. While the decision is largely portrayed as a *fait accompli*, there is, nonetheless, an element of negotiation, if you will. Of Mary questioning Gabriel as to the details. With her finally consenting: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 2.38). What would have happened if Mary said, "There's no way in God's green earth I'm going to agree to that crazy plan"? Would that have torpedoed the plan for the Incarnation? At the very least, it would have been back to God and to the drawing board. But even in agreeing to participate in God's plan, Mary was placing herself at risk. Being unmarried and pregnant would have opened her to ridicule and disgrace, making her a social pariah. Her very life could have been at risk. As an unmarried woman, it could be presumed that she was unfaithful to her fiancé Joseph. A transgression punishable by death.

And then there's Joseph. As we hear in Matthew's Gospel, when "Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly" (Mt 1.18b-19). It's possible that his refusal to go along could have endangered the whole operation. After all, given the place of women in that day and age, Mary would have needed a supportive partner to make all this work—having God's son and with help to raise him. Thanks to an angel coming to Joseph in a dream, Joseph is assured that this is all part of God's plan and so he changes his mind and agrees to play his part. But even this was not without risk. Having a fiancée who was pregnant would raise questions about his own moral standing. Was the child his? If so, he would be looked down upon because of prohibitions against premarital sex. If not, he would still face shame and ridicule because of the actions of his fiancée. No matter how you parse it, Joseph's social standing was at risk, endangering the wellbeing of himself, his wife, and her baby.

Even the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem, upon hearing the news that "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord," were at risk; leaving their flocks in the field to see this miracle that has occurred. Risking their sheep to predators or to bandits, and thereby risking their own livelihood.

While both Mary and Joseph faced risks in agreeing to God's plan, and even the shepherds risked their livelihood and their flocks to witness the newborn Messiah, perhaps the greatest risks, however, were borne by God himself. Just consider the vulnerability involved in God taking human form. As theologian Rachel Held Evans writes:

It is nearly impossible to believe: God shrinking down to the size of a zygote, implanted in the soft lining of a woman's womb.... God inching down the birth canal and entering this world covered in blood, perhaps into the steady, waiting arms of a midwife. God crying out in hunger. God reaching for his mother's breasts. God totally relaxed, eyes closed, his chubby little arms raised over his head in a posture of complete trust. God resting in his mother's lap....<sup>1</sup>

The risk to mother and child during pregnancy, particularly in a time when pregnancy was incredibly perilous and the outcome uncertain, with infant mortality rates incredibly high. In this case, exacerbated by the fact that Joseph with Mary nearly nine months pregnant had to make the long and perilous trip over rough terrain from Nazareth to Bethlehem. A trip of 80 miles that would have taken a week or more by foot or on donkey. And then further exacerbated by the fact that they could find no place to stay in Bethlehem, other than a cold, drafty, smelly, dirty stable. Conditions that would have made the delivery itself more complicated and dangerous.

And, of course, once the child was born, there were still many years of challenging conditions that would have been a potential danger to any child: disease, poor sanitation, potential malnutrition, just to name a few.

Of course, we don't know what type of protections God may have had in place against any of these perils of human gestation, birth, and early life. Although, we can glean from Scripture that the Incarnation—God coming among us in the flesh—served a dual purpose. One was to allow for direct face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh connection between God and humanity. The other was to allow God to have a fully human experience. To experience life the way we do, in all our humanity. That being the case, it's possible, if not highly likely, that this meant walking the tightrope without a net. Which certainly was the case at the end of Jesus' life, so why not throughout, starting with his birth.

All this to say, God entrusted God's very self, totally, completely, in human bodily form, in the form of a defenseless baby, to the care of a woman. The invincible Creator becoming vulnerable, taking on and entering into the form of the created. Entrusting God's Self to the care, nurture, and protection of a peasant couple in first century Palestine. All for the purpose of being able to come amongst his beloved creation. To live among us, as we are. To truly experience in a visceral way what it means to be created, what it means to be human, the good, the bad, and the ugly. To establish—to re-establish—relationship with us. And through his death and resurrection, to provide for our salvation: the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life with him. To provide for ongoing relationship with us. All at great risk and great cost to himself.

God had the courage to enter into the vulnerability of human life. Carried to term by a human woman who had the courage to say "yes" to his request that she be the mother of his Son. Raised and nurtured by a loving family who had the courage to risk their own lives and reputations for the sake of their son—God's son—God in the flesh. The Son of God, Emmanuel, God with us, who had the courage to go against the religious and social systems of his day to

teach humanity a better way. Emmanuel, God with us, who had the courage to go to the cross in our place, that we might be forgiven and saved. Emmanuel, God with us, who did all of this, from start to finish, out of love for us, his beloved children. A love so vast, so expansive, that the only way God could even begin to express it was by becoming one of us, to express that love in person, in the flesh.

So, as we come to this place, celebrating the birth of Jesus—Emmanuel, God with us—we really come recognizing the profound risks that God took to make this all happen. The risks to Mary, the risks to Joseph, the risks to Jesus, the risks to God's self. All out of love for us. And, in so doing, God invites us to take a risk in return. To take the risk of sharing and spreading the love he has shown us with all whom we encounter.

Merry Christmas!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/courageous-vulnerability/>