

Invited Home
By Ridgley Joyner
Luke 2:1-7

Have you ever had that moment when the sky stops you in your tracks?
I have, plenty of times.

I was 10 or so: One night my sister woke me up, handed me a blanket and walked me outside to our pasture, where my other sister had been for at least an hour, lying on the ground. Come lay down, she said, there's a meteor shower tonight. I had never even heard of a meteor shower, much less seen it—I didn't grow up in the age of YouTube. I laid down between my sisters and looked up—so many shooting stars I couldn't see them all at once. It was like time stood still.

I was 18: We had been riding shoulder to shoulder in a van for hours. I was on a hiking and camping trip out west with 15 other college students and two pastors. We arrived late to Bryce Canyon, and we were half asleep. Our leaders stopped the van at our campsite and invited us to take a 'short hike' to the rim. I remember crawling up on my belly because we were *really* close to the edge. But somehow, it was almost as light as day when I looked over the ledge, because there it was in all its glory, the night sky revealing the crevices of the earth shaped with so many jagged edges and cliffs. In the silence of the night, the stars and the moon illumined the canyon, speaking volumes louder than any night creature nearby. It was like time stood still.

I was 32: It was late, very late. The 4.5 hour drive to Penn Yann, NY had turned into a 6 hour drive and I found myself greeting the campsite in the wee hours of the morning. But setting up camp...just had to wait. Because I couldn't stop straining my neck with my mouth wide open in the summer fog looking up at the sky. So many stars, I didn't need a

flashlight. It was something I couldn't take a picture of—I just had to sit there and take it in and hope I remember it for years to come.

Have you ever had that moment when the sky stops you in your tracks?

This Tuesday we celebrated the winter solstice—the longest night of the year—the day with the most darkness. And this year, I was just so struck by the fact that we were lucky enough to have a full moon on Saturday. Big things were happening this week in the big black abyss of the sky. I hope you took a moment to take it in.

And all the while big things were happening in the sky, big things were happening here. For it was the week before Christmas, and it was more than the week before Christmas, it was the last week before school ended for break, it was the week our college students and kids came home, it was the week before some of us went on vacation before January 2022. And it was the week the omicron variant of the COVID-19 graced many households as an unexpected guest.

I felt it this week—it felt dangerously familiar—talk of an outbreak, cases on the rise, precaution evaluation, get your tests, make sure you're boosted, start to pay more attention to where you are, what you're doing and what your family is doing. It seemed like everyone I talked to was getting surprised by a positive test result. Suddenly it was like the thing that we had waited so long to be a memory came back to visit just in time for Christmas.

But we're here. Whether we are worshipping from afar or worshipping here in the building, we have made it here. And being here isn't a feat just because we made it through another stressful holiday season, it's a feat because we are still living in a time of pandemic. But every year no matter what is happening in our lives and in our world, Christmas Eve still comes.

Reminding us of that night long ago when big things were happening in the sky, and it stopped many people in their tracks. For that night was the night heaven and earth met in an obscure place—the light came into the dark fields and in that dim room in Bethlehem. **Immanuel, God. With. us.**

Tonight, we read the birth story in the gospel of Luke, a story we hear year after year, but what changes is us—what we bring to the text, and what the Spirit is illumining for us as we sit here in the dark of the night.

And here tonight, God invites us home. Not home to this sanctuary, or this worship service, but home to God through this sacred story. This familiar story that is home to us every Christmas is a tradition among many that brings us home to God. Celebrating God's light in the darkness—God coming among us in flesh and bone—the incarnation of the Christ child—a king was born of a virgin and his palace was a manger filled with hay.

Luke begins by placing us in the story—there is a census and everyone in the Roman world needed to be accounted for Mary and Joseph have traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. This was no quick stint down the highway—Bethlehem and Nazareth—traveling that journey was at least a couple days if not more and not for the faint of heart—and especially hard for Mary, who was with child. Bethlehem was busy, a buzz, big things were happening, and there was no occupancy to be had. Luke tells us that while they were in Bethlehem, the time had come for Mary to give birth to Jesus, but because there was no place for them, he was born in a stable surrounded by animals, wrapped in cloth, and placed in a manger, a feeding trough full of hay. That one verse-verse 7. Takes such a chaotic time filled with fear and pain and love and joy and boils it down to one moment. And just like that, God made a home with us in the world.

Next, we read of the shepherds watching their flocks by night, taken aback by a magnificent scene in the sky, it stopped them in their tracks. They stopped what they were doing, and paid attention, and followed to Bethlehem, where they found the Christ child.

It isn't until the end of this passage that we are clued into what was happening with Mary in verse 19. BUT, Luke says *Mary treasured* all these things, pondering them in her heart. Taking it all in, paying attention, keeping these things, these moments close and trying to make sense of it all. Because—in its essence, that night was unbelievable.

I wonder what she was taking in exactly. The hospitality of stranger, the shepherds finding their way to them. The heavenly host, the coo of her baby boy. Was she overcome with emotion? Was she elated to have safely given birth? Or was it the donkey to her side crunching on hay from the side of the manger her son was sleeping in. Perhaps she was thinking about what was to come--wondering How could this be? Why me? Perhaps she was giving a prayer of thanksgiving that God would choose her.

This year, when I read this familiar story, I am struck by Mary's "paying attention" and "taking it in". Paying attention led those in the Christmas story to see that God was at work doing big things. God was unfolding something that would forever change the world, through a vulnerable baby on a bed of hay in a manger.

I wonder, how often have we been caught up in the whirlwind of life and the holidays that we fail to pay attention to the little ways God is speaking to us? How often have we ran to the finish line of the Christmas Eve service and Christmas morning, failing to take in the

invitation God gives us in Luke—to treasure and ponder the very story that calls us home every year.

These days, after *this* year, we very rarely have had a chance to take in what God is illumining for us, to treasure it, and ponder.

Have you had a moment lately where you've stopped in your tracks to just take something in?

Perhaps it was the beauty of the moon, or the sight of two kids playing and talking together, a sacred moment when you felt the holy spirit so palpably.

It is a practice, this paying attention. Not living life in autopilot. Making space for creativity not reactivity. Allowing space for joy to flow through our lives. Stopping what we're doing and focusing on taking it all in is *hard* but it is a practice that if done, takes us back time and time again to the ways that God is at work-- Where heaven and earth are meeting in obscure places like a barn.

Our God is a God who is our light in the darkness, perpetually illuminating things in a new way, unfolding a kingdom of peace hope love and joy. And we, need to pay attention, to treasure these small silent things, these still small moments that are actually speaking volumes in the silence. Immanuel, God with us.

This evening, I invite you, wherever you may be, to take this moment in. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath in and feel your chest drop slowly as you exhale. Open your eyes and look around. Take in what you see. Treasure it. Ponder the glory of God.

Perhaps you see your loved ones comfy on the couch in Christmas jammies with a warm mug of hot cocoa. Perhaps you're on a laptop worshipping God in a quiet room that has become your sanctuary these past months. Maybe you're listening on your phone, attune to all the

sounds as they come across your headphones. Perhaps you're in the church and you're looking around at your church family and smiling under your mask, because you can't help but smile when you think of how much you've shared with them over the years.

Perhaps you immediately were reminded of a treasured Christmas moment you had here in this space in years past. Maybe taking it all in means grief creeps back in for a moment when you remember who isn't here.

But here's the thing, God doesn't invite us home tonight physically or spiritually to sit amongst family by the glow of a dimly lit sanctuary comforted by the sentimentality of carols and candles. God invites us home tonight to remember that while big things are happening all around us, that God is enacting big things in our midst, if only we pay attention to the still small moments, the places where God is illumining things for us in ways we don't even realize yet.

So tonight, as we celebrate the coming of the Christ child, let us allow this familiar sacred story stop us in our tracks, to experience anew our light in the darkness. My prayer is that we may be like Mary—treasuring this story and pondering it in our hearts. May be like the shepherds, paying attention to big things God is unfolding in our midst, let us be like the angels singing glory to God in the highest so that all the world might know-God is in our midst!

One of my favorite liturgical artists and poet: Jan Richardson wrote a blessing I return to every year called “Where the light begins”

She said, In these hours, in these days, though we cannot see or feel or know all the ways that God is radiantly illuminating us, may we open ourselves toward that light.

May we open our eyes, our hands, our hearts to meet it. May we lean into the light that begins in the deepest dark, bearing itself into this world *for us*. -Jan Richardson

Where the Light Begins

Perhaps it does not begin. Perhaps it is always. Perhaps it takes a lifetime to open our eyes, to learn to see what has forever shimmered in front of us— the luminous line of the map in the dark the vigil flame in the house of the heart the love so searing we cannot keep from singing, from crying out in testimony and praise. Perhaps this day will be the mountain over which the dawn breaks. Perhaps we will turn our face toward it, toward what has been always. Perhaps our eyes will finally open in ancient recognition, willingly dazzled, illuminated at last.

Perhaps this day the light begins in us.