

Down to Earth

Rev. Edward C. Horne

United Methodist Church of Westport and Weston

December 24, 2011
Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 2:1-20

Charles Seymour was the sixth Duke of Somerset in Great Britain. This particular Duke, who lived in the early 1700's, had an aversion to associating with anyone except those of his aristocratic class. He was such a snob that he refused even to converse with his servants, communicating with them only by sign language. Seymour also had a number of houses built along the route from his country estate to London, so that whenever he traveled he would not have to mingle at all with the lower classes in public inns.

The high and the haughty are not limited to any time or place, of course. We hear about a number of them in the Christmas story, for instance. Augustus, who was the adopted son of Julius Caesar, became the supreme ruler of the Roman Empire through a series of conquests and bloody battles. Fancying himself as the "savior" and the "lord" of his people, Augustus declared his dead father divine and named himself "son of God." Some of his people worshipped him, too.

King Herod, the Jewish monarch at the time of Jesus' birth, was known as Herod the Great. He just loved to build things in his own honor. One was a grand palace not far from Jerusalem known as the Herodium, which he built on top of a 40-foot high mound so that he could survey the entire domain around him and, of course, they could gaze upon his grandeur whenever they looked up.

One of those places down below Herod's palace was the town of Bethlehem. Bethlehem literally means "town of bread," and the aroma of baking bread could be smelled for miles around. Otherwise it was a sleepy little town where very little of note ever happened.

Except for this particular time, when Bethlehem's streets swelled with the movement of people returning home for the census that had been ordered by Emperor Augustus. Among the guests were a young woman who was very pregnant and her husband-to-be. They had made the difficult 10-day journey down from their current residence of Nazareth in order to be counted in the man's home city.

Our common conception is that Mary and Joseph went to the local Holiday Inn and were told that there were no vacancies, so they got the barn out back. In fact, the Greek word for "inn," *kataluma*, actually is better translated as "guest room," which means that they probably went to Joseph's home, a typically small, peasant dwelling, only to find that

the lone guest room was already jammed with 15 people and there was just no more room for them in the kataluma. So they were offered shelter in the space where the animals were kept. And there, Mary gave birth to her first-born son and laid him in a manger.

Over time we have romanticized this scene and said to ourselves, "Isn't it sweet. Jesus was born among the animals who quietly gathered around him. I'll bet the little drummer boy was there, too." But that's not the way it really was. If Luke were writing today, Mary and Joseph would have ended up in an emergency shelter, or maybe in a garage out back where they cleared out enough of the junk to make a bed for themselves. There, in the midst of old tires and tools, the baby was born.

This was no fairy tale. And no place for a king to come into the world.

I don't know whether Herod was at home in his palace the night the birth took place in that stable. According to Matthew, he didn't even know a rival king had been born. Very few other people noticed, either. It all happened below the radar.

The only ones to get the signal were some shepherds out in the hills. That is another element of the story that would have caught people's attention. Shepherds were about as low on society's totem pole as you could get. They were thought of as outside the law, wandering around tending their sheep. You didn't want to get too close, for sanitary reasons if nothing else. And these were the night watch shepherds, who worked for the guys on the day shift--the lowest of the low.

Who are the first to get the message of the newborn king? Not The Duke of Somerset or Herod or even Augustus, all those at the top who were used to the privilege of power and inside information. Instead he came in at the bottom, announced to these nobodies, these outliers.

People who first heard the story must have asked, "What was God up to?"

Actually, it wasn't so much what God was up to as what God was down to. God had always been seen as "up there"—up in heaven, on the top of Mount Sinai or other heights. The Greeks would have been scandalized by the idea of a God born among mortals, subject to the vicissitudes of earthly existence. God was above it all, removed from the pain and suffering we must endure.

Not this God, the God of Jesus, our God. This God comes down to earth wherever we are, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, in our less-than-fairy-tale, overcrowded, conflicted lives. Our lives that so often get off track or veer away from where we had intended.

It's true, isn't it, that, of all the days of the year, Christmas is the one day that we want to be just right. We want our kids to love their presents, our dinner to be delicious and our family members to enjoy one another.

But it doesn't always happen that way. The kids get tired and fussy. Adults get tired and fussy. Somebody shows up late for dinner or not at all. Or maybe we spend this Christmas in the hospital with someone we love or with an ache in our heart for the one who isn't at the table. It rarely turns out to be the perfect Christmas card picture we paint in our minds' eye.

But it is just into these less-than-perfect places that God comes. Our God who is not the God-Up-There somewhere who answers our prayers by lifting us up out of our lives and transporting us to safer, calmer, more peaceful place---much as we sometimes wish he would---but the God-Down-Here who comes to us in the midst of our messy, unkempt moments and pitches a tent with us.

However far from home we are, however less than ideal our circumstances, however little our lives reflect the picture-book Christmas we plan, God comes right where we are. That is where God is born, in whatever cradle we offer him, on any pile of straw we can pull together with our hands.

None of heaven's escalators are going up tonight. Everybody up there is coming down here, right into our little Bethlehem, bringing us the God who has decided to make his home in our arms.

So here's my question to you: Will you hold this child to your heart? Will you allow yourself to sit in the straw and rub shoulders with shepherds? Can you see people with the eyes of God, not based on their net worth but on their need for love? Proud and successful as you may be, can you understand how truly blessed you are with all that you have been given and live with a servant's humble heart?

If you can do at least some of these things, you will be able to come to the manger, this feeding trough, and find there a place of spiritual nourishment that can feed the deep hunger for companionship and meaning and purpose for your life that you have been seeking. Then the God who came to earth in Bethlehem will have come down to earth in you.