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“The Grandest Entrance” The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (12/24/2023, Christmas Eve Service)

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Let us pray, Almighty God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in this site. O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

In the fifth and most recent season of Fargo, there is a scene in one of the earlier episodes where Jennifer, Jason Leigh, remember her? Fast Times at Ridgemoor High, etc.. Jennifer Jason Leigh, who's playing the CEO of a debt consolidation company, walks down the Grand Spiral staircase in the foyer of her mansion to greet some people who have entered her home.

And as she's coming down the staircase, one of her assistants is walking next to her and she feels he is just too close in that he is damaged, missing the grand and impressive entrance she wants to make. And she starts on the stairway, tells him to turn around. He goes back up and then she does what you would do if you had a spiral staircase. She then out walks and impresses her guests. And it struck me that this is what we like to do. We like to make grand and impressive entrances. I mean, did you see how this guy came in? I mean, he borrowed that from Liberace, made everybody walk in front of him. No. So we do this in church, but we do it all kinds of places in life. Whether you're Travis Scott bursting onto the stage in your current Circus Maximus tour, whether you're the bride at a wedding, you make everybody look at you. When you come into the room, you wear the fanciest dress. You get a special song that's just for you. And you walk down and you make a great entrance. I saw this in 2017 here in Waco.

I got a call that said a global business leader was coming to town and wanted to meet pastors for whatever reason, and it was all very cloak and dagger, mysterious. We were told that we would get a call on the day about where to go. And so we go to this place and it's the World Cup Café. We're down there and waiting to see who's going to walk in the door and all these people start coming in a room full of pastors and all these folks, this entourage starts to come in and we wonder who it's going to be.

And it was my close personal friend Mark Zuckerberg, who just walked into the room, hoodie and all. And so he did not look impressive, but

the whole way it was arranged and orchestratedd, I said, you know, this is a guy who knows how to command the attention of a group of people. So whether you're running onto a football field through a flaming arch in McLane Stadium or whether you're coming into church on Christmas Eve or whatever the situation, we like to make these grand entrances when something big is happening, when it's a big deal, we want everybody's attention.

I mean, I'm erupting from flowers like Stephanie. It's spring coming up from Haiti. So, you know, you're Greek myths, right? Let's Google it and we make a big deal. When something important is happening, we make a grand entrance. And that's what Christmas is about. In that deep cut of the Bible. You heard the second reading from Titus chapter two, verse 11.

At the beginning, the grace of God has appeared. That's Christmas. It's a grand entrance. And then you heard Al read that story of the grand entrance in the Gospel of Luke, a story you've heard about shepherds and angels and babies in mangers. And I got to say, the grace of God appearing the entrance. It's kind of lame. There's no pyrotechnics, no drones spelling out JSOC in the Bethlehem sky. There's no press conference. It's a backwater town in a backwater region. And the only reason it's happening there is for the dumbest of reasons Taxes, The emperor said, We want to register you. You heard Al read that that registration wasn't just to register, it was to collect taxes. So they're in this small town for a dumb reason. It's been difficult to get there.

It's not on the radar. Nobody knows it's happening. The magic. I do come, but that's months. If not years later. Takes a long time to travel from Persia on a camel. The angels do show up and make an announcement, but they don't go into the town center in Jerusalem, the top of Temple Mount, where it makes sense to do.

They don't go to Rome to make the announcement. They go out to an abandoned lot in the back of the Wal-Mart where the late shift custodians are gone. Their cigaret break. That gives you an idea of the socioeconomic standing, of the shepherds and the people who had to work the graveyard shift same then as now. And they're the ones that hear about this birth of a savior.

And after the Angels make the announcement to these forgotten people, they leave. They don't say, We'll show you how to get there. We'll hover over the manger for a while. As your nativity on your mantel incorrectly displays. They don't do that. They just leave. They sing in heaven and then they leave. And speaking of Jesus himself, the incarnate son of God, I mean, no fancy costume is naked.

And then they wrap him in rags and put him in a saliva encrusted animal trough. No powerful speeches. The closest he gets is crying despite what the Christmas carols say. No cry. He did make a he was a baby. They just got born. Talk to Mary. He's God in the flesh. God in the flesh. If you were God coming in flesh, wouldn't you have some sort of impressive horse to ride in on or something?

The Escalade, maybe, But no, he's small, he's powerless, he's weak. He can't hold up his own head, his eyes can't even focus on things

farther than ten inches away from his face in the middle of the night with livestock. And there's a whiff of scandal about the whole thing to the circumstances of his birth. Right, Mary? The Holy Spirit. You get what I'm saying? Okay. Maybe felt like that was irreverent, but I'm giving you permission to laugh if you would like. But the question is, if this is how God is arriving in the world, why no self-respecting God would show up in this way. Most people I know think God is out to get them. On some level.

They may not consciously think that. They might not say that if you quizzed them on their theology. But I know that this is how most people think that God is displeased, may be downright angry, not happy with them. They do this because I, as God's representative, can't run into you at H-e-b's produce section without you telling me why you haven't been in church.

Because you think God is angry. I'm angry and God is angry or too. And he's the one that really matters. The apologies that come all the time. I, in my line of work, meet people who have come back to church after a long absence, and there's real trepidation. There's real fear, both in the judgment people have received within the community of faith, but as well the idea that God is out to get them.

People are scared because of something they've done, or many things they've done. Maybe, man, maybe that's not you. Maybe you've lived your life on the straight and narrow. But nevertheless, I know some people who just feel like they're sort of a failure, like they haven't measured up. Their favorite Christmas song is 1973. Merle Haggard. If we can make it through December, right?

A guy gets laid off and he doesn't know what Christmas is going to be like for his little girl and he just feels like a failure. Saint Dolly Parton sings about the same thing, and it's a hard candy Christmas, right, where there's not enough really for presents. So you're just going to get hard candy. Maybe that's not you.

Maybe the thing that you're dealing with this time of year is loneliness. Sometimes it can be accentuated heightened because you're not supposed to feel it. It is the most wonderful time of the year and you're surrounded by people all the time. Maybe I have a friend who, when he was a priest early in his career in South Carolina, the church he served had a blue Christmas service, which was sort of a time for people who this time of year was difficult because of grief or loss. And he said it was all widowers and widows coming. And as he talked to them, he listened as they talked about how Christmas had changed over the years for them. And now at this point in their life, they got fewer and fewer Christmas cards and fewer and fewer gifts. Maybe you're feeling what George Michael felt last Christmas. I gave you my heart.

The very next day you gave it away. So this year I'm giving it to someone special. Now, this really lamely wonderful pop song from the eighties. It gets at something which I think is very human, which is once you've been rejected, you armor up. You want to make sure that doesn't happen again. And so you begin to build defenses around it. This means what many people do, often when they've experienced

rejection, is they have a persona that they present to the world, and it's very different from who they actually are inside the number of people living a double life. And I'm not talking about having a family in Miami or whatever. I'm talking. I mean, that happens to you'd be amazed, but I'm talking about people for whom their interior life is vastly different from what people see on the outside, the levels of anxiety and depression.

And I know it's Christmas and I'm getting too good news, but it's worth naming the thing which even though those carols which are so familiar, you don't maybe hear the words, but in sin and Darkness pining, we were all just talking about how we were in Satan's power. No, but the reason I think these songs track and hold us is because there's not a single person in this place that hasn't at some time walked through the valley of the shadow of death or come to the end of their rope, or had that dark night of the soul and feeling it now often in a heightened way.

So the reason I talk about why Jesus comes in the way he does and to name these realities that we face is to say that you are exactly the very ones to whom God comes. And the reason He comes in the way that He does, because we think we who Isaiah calls us, we people who are walking and have walked in darkness, we think that God is going to sort of come from above.

You know, He's up there looking down on us. I hear people say all the time, they call God the man upstairs and the the good Christian that I am, I punch them in the throat whenever they say that. I just you got to nip heresy in the bud right away. You just got to no mercy for that. Yeah, he's he's the man upstairs, sort of the Santa Claus who sees you when you're sleeping and knows when you're awake.

He knows if you've been bad or good. So be good for goodness sake. That's how people see God so often up there looking down with judgment. But when God enters the world, not with a big terrifying bang, but with this tiny little whimper of a baby's cry, it's telling the people who have walked in darkness that God is coming for you and to you in a way completely different than what you expected.

Your worst fears have not been realized, but your greatest dreams have come true because God is coming not above you and not even on the same level, but below you. Right? You have to reach down to pick up a baby. You don't put them up on the shelf. That's where the elf goes. The baby is low. God comes so that we know in our sin that we can't stop in our emotional paralysis, in our broken relationships.

The first Christmas after the divorce, the failures of the career that went sideways, the investment that tanked, the losses, the sheer, you know, those are big things. But there's also just the sheer, unrelenting inconvenience and indignities of life which are captured in this story. Having to travel to Bethlehem in your third trimester and not having a place to have your birth plan go like you wanted. God comes into the midst of that as a baby. And the chief thing that God is trying to tell you is that when God looks at you, God's feeling is tenderness and compassion and love and mercy. The miracle I think of Christmas is not the parking spot you find at Central Texas

Marketplace on December 23rd, or that the pie turns out perfectly. The Christmas miracle is that you learn that how God feels about you and what you learn at the coming of this child is that God likes you. It sounds sort of silly and maybe simple to say, but that's not what most people think. Therapists, behavioral specialists, teachers, counselors, doctors, pastors. You know that most people don't think that God likes them.

They think there's something wrong with themselves. They're not good enough. They're a failure on some level. Most people don't make out of the bed and wake up first thing in the morning thinking how great they are. They wake up, aware of their deficiencies and flaws and Christmas. This baby says that God has come to be with you, wants to be with you, wants to be tender to you, wants to embrace you, and that you are not alone.

And ultimately this God wants to be so in life with you that He will also die for you and deal with all the stuff that you can't defeat. Sin and death. But that hasn't happened yet. This is the beginning of the story. At this moment of his birth, there's been no feeding of the 5000 or miraculous catches of fish or clearing of the temple.

No healings with a word or a touch. There's been no march through Jerusalem, no cross, no empty tomb yet. But it's all coming for you. And it begins on this night. Christmas is sort of God's big way of saying the thing that has been stuck is now unstuck. The thing that has been blocked is unblocked. The alienation, the despair, the weight that you carry, You might still carry them, but a change is coming. This child, son of God, has been born and he will do what he promises to do. Christmas means the sun is rising. It may not yet be noon, but new light for you in your actual life. Not theological platitudes or abstractions, but for you. Because this is so real. This is just the last thing I want to say.

We all want to turn over a new leaf, metaphorically, but what if it really happened? And that's where Christmas really matters because it really happened. Luke is not saying and a long time ago, in a galaxy far away, he says, When Corinthians was governor of Syria, it's a real thing. And Christmas means this real thing has happened. It may not yet be high noon, but light has dawned.

The sun is coming, changes here and that's what this child means. The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. The grace of God has appeared. Amen.