

Title: The New in the Familiar  
Date: 12/24/2022 (Christmas Eve, Year A)  
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church  
Service: 8:00 pm Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)  
Readings: [Isaiah 9:2-7](#); [Titus 2:11-14](#); [Luke 2:1-14\(15-20\)](#); [Psalm 96](#)  
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/bz8ayMDfXpE?t=2217>

Gracious God, grant us the wisdom and the heart of Mary  
so that we may treasure all the words we've heard tonight  
and ponder them as she did.

Loving God, grant us the curiosity and faith of the shepherds  
so that we may accept, seek out, and proclaim  
the good news as they did.

Amen.

Merry Christmas!

How many of you have watched made-for-television Christmas movies?

There is something nice and predictable about them. Whether you're watching them on the Hallmark Channel or Netflix, Lifetime or Freeform, they follow a certain formula.

The early movies went something like this:

Woman with a busy job in a big city ends up in a small town over the holidays.

There's a spark between her and a man she meets, or meets again, but they're kept apart by some obstacle, like an old grudge or a simple misunderstanding.

Eventually, she discovers the true meaning of family, or Christmas, or what it looks like to live a fulfilling life, and they live happily ever after.

Over time, production companies have **very** gradually expanded their offerings. To date, the Hallmark Channel has produced a total of six Hanukkah movies,<sup>1</sup> and this year they're premiering their first Kwanzaa movie.<sup>2</sup> The demographics of the main characters have become **slightly** more diverse when it comes to sexuality and race. But once we hit play, we can pretty much predict what's going to happen.

Coming to a Christmas Eve service can be a little bit like watching one of these movies. It's comforting because it's familiar. Once we walk into church, we can pretty much predict what's going to happen.

There are poinsettias. There is a reading from Handel's *Messiah*, I mean, the book of the prophet Isaiah. There are hymns; the tunes are familiar even if we don't know all the words by heart. There is a story of the birth of Jesus from one of the gospels. Tonight, there are angels and shepherds and a baby, and Mary and Joseph and a little town called Bethlehem.

There are things we take for granted tonight that would have been a scandal to those who first encountered the story of Jesus way back when:

-*This* Wonderful Counselor didn't take up residence in the Temple or in the courts of emperors and kings. He offered his wisdom on the mountains and the plains, in boats and in synagogues, and at tables with outcasts and sinners.

-*This* Mighty God was born to parents who didn't issue political decrees and religious rules but were subject to them, to parents who couldn't find a guest room anywhere, at a guesthouse or among Joseph's fellow descendants of David. *This* Mighty God will weep in a garden and die on a cross.

-*This* Everlasting Father was wrapped in bands of cloth before being placed in a manger made of stone. Decades later a different Joseph, Joseph of Arimathea, will wrap him in linen cloth before placing him in a tomb carved out of rock (Lk 23:50-54).

-While Caesar Augustus was called the king of peace for bringing a golden age of peace and prosperity to the Roman Empire, it feels like we are still waiting for the peace promised by the coming of *this* Prince of Peace.

-Most of all, God became human. Human! HU-MAN. God was a messy, crying baby who needed to be nursed and burped and changed. This is not usually the picture we find in Renaissance paintings or stained-glass windows.

I wonder if God got tired of sending angels and prophets. Or perhaps we got so used to prophets and angels that God needed to do something drastically different, something completely unpredictable, to get through to us.

On Christmas Eve, the grace of God has appeared... in the form of a baby.

The good news of God has been announced...by angels to shepherds in the fields. I'm sorry to tell you that we might be in the wrong place tonight! Though St. Alban's was once in the fields, now it's on the edge of a sprawling city.

The angels made such an impression on these shepherds that they rushed to Bethlehem. They wanted to see this sign for themselves. They spread out and knocked on door after door until they found the family they were looking for.

Once the shepherds walked into the place where the animals were kept, what did they see? In front them was a baby, with his overwhelmed parents beside him. The angels hadn't said anything about the baby being the Son of God and the Son of Mary, they simply announced that he will be Savior, Messiah, and Lord.

Emperor Augustus was called savior of the whole world, and he had the infrastructure of an empire and legions of soldiers behind him. This was a baby in a feeding trough for animals, and when he grows up, his followers will be fishermen and tax collectors, and people like us.

The people of Israel expected their Messiah to be anointed king and to establish a kingdom for them here on earth. This child will grow up to be a teacher who tells very-not-straightforward parables about the Kingdom of Heaven-- a place (?), a state of mind (?) or a set of relationships (?)-- that is somehow both here and not quite here yet. The prophet Isaiah said the Lord will be coming to judge and to uphold justice and righteousness. Jesus will show us that he is the Way, the Truth, the Life, but we will still lose our way.

Over and over, we will be reminded to repent, to turn toward God. Whether we pray silently or aloud, upholding the justice of God and being right with God means we also need to pray with our hands and feet, with an eye toward the well-being of all of our neighbors.

The shepherds saw this baby wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger. But they didn't just see a baby. With the voices of the angels still ringing in their ears, they saw God's promise. They saw God entrusting Godself to God's people. They saw God coming not as king or chief priest but as one of them. God came for *them*, to be with *them*.

This wasn't the story the shepherds expected. This was unlike any story about any god that they'd heard before. This was a **new** story, and God wasn't just telling them this story or inviting them to watch, God wanted them to be a part of it. Some people might have considered shepherds to be smelly and unimportant, without any power or authority, but the angels showed them that they had an important role to play.

The shepherds shared the good news that the Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord, has been born for them, among them, as a sign of God's goodwill toward them. They shared what they had heard and seen with those who were by Jesus' side but hadn't seen what they saw. They shared the good news with folks who were just like them, with those who needed to hear it the most **and** those who might have the hardest time believing that it is for them.

When Jesus is a bit older, at the very beginning of his ministry, he will unroll the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and proclaim, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:16-20).

Some days, it might feel like things will never change. Rulers like Augustus and Quirinius will never do right by those on the margins. Problems like climate change and poverty and racial injustice and gun violence are too big, the status quo too entrenched. After getting sick ourselves or losing a loved one, it might feel like the pain and grief will never go away.

But the baby we celebrate tonight is a sign that God is with us. In the person of Jesus, God showed us that God will break into our lives in unexpected, inconvenient, and miraculous ways. The story won't always turn out the way we predict, and that is something we can take comfort in, too.

With the voices of the angels in their ears, the shepherds looked at the baby and saw a sign. They didn't know when or how the good news shared by the angels would be fulfilled. But they knew that it started with a promise, by trusting that God is with them, and that they are a part of this. The story of the First Christmas has unfolded, and it is still unfolding. We too have a role to play.

So, as we leave tonight, as we celebrate the Twelve Days of Christmas, may the words of these songs and these readings continue to ring in our ears. By treasuring and pondering these words in our hearts, may we notice something new in something familiar. May we seek out the signs of God for ourselves so that we may share and be a part of that good news.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://shallistreamit.com/2022/12/18/where-to-stream-hanukkah-movies/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tvfanatic.com/2022/12/brooks-darnell-on-hallmarks-first-kwanzaa-movie-holiday-heritage/>