

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
December 18, 2022
Luke 2:1-14

“A Letter to Alan Andrew Huffman and Reese Madilyn Huffman on the Occasion of Their Baptisms”

Dear Alan and Reese,

Today is a very special day in your life. Your mom and dad, your family, friends of your family, members of the session, and members of First Presbyterian Church dedicated you to God. They acknowledged that you are God’s child, they promised to guide and nurture you with love and prayer, and they encouraged you to follow Christ.

Now I have said plenty of times, Alan and Reese, but I’ll say it again: I love to baptize children (and adults) because there’s just an overwhelming joy for me at knowing that I was there with you at the beginning of your journey of faith because everything begins in your baptism. It inaugurates a whole new life for you. You see, we believe that at the heart of all our relationships is our baptism. Your baptisms today are a sign and seal that God loves you, that God has called you to be in this special relationship, and that God is with you forever. Think of it as your initiation ceremony into the church.

On the Sunday we baptized the two of you, we were nearing the end of Advent, which is a season when we prepare to celebrate Christ’s coming into the world. Now you should know, Reese and Alan, that there are those who think it inappropriate to sing Christmas carols during Advent! For the liturgically minded each season of the church year has its own mood and theme. For example, Lent is particularly somber because it is about repentance, so singing *Halleluiah* is not allowed. Advent is most decidedly about waiting and should not be impatiently infiltrated by the big event, therefore, no Christmas carols.

To that I say, bah humbug! Why should we pretend that the Lord isn't yet come so that we can appear to wait? For goodness sake, let heaven and nature sing! So this morning not only are we singing all Christmas carols, my apologies to the liturgical purists among us (sort of!), but we heard the Christmas story, too. Because sometimes you just need a little Christmas -- even on December 18. But also, Reese and Alan, there's something to learn in this beautiful story about one's journey of faith. You see, in the Christmas story we have all these different characters from all walks of life and even different faiths, yet somehow they still get to Bethlehem. And I think that has something to teach you, and all of us gathered here today, about how our journeys of faith take different twists and turns throughout our lives, but we still arrive at Bethlehem to hear the glorious news that a child has been, a Savior, Emmanuel, God with us.

So Alan and Reese, this letter is for your future self, and all of you . . . so put away your worries for the next few minutes about your Christmas to-do list and picture yourself on Christmas morning. How did you arrive at Bethlehem?

Because there are many ways to get there. Why just look at Joseph. He went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, because he belonged to the house and line of David. His journey was circuitous and took him from place to place before he arrived at Bethlehem. Perhaps your journey to Bethlehem has been circuitous, too. Not necessarily geographically circuitous, though it may have been that, but theologically circuitous. Perhaps you were born and raised in a certain faith tradition that you no longer adhere to. Maybe this journey has been long, and difficult, and even painful at times. You've had to wrestle with what it is, exactly, you do believe and maybe, at times, you've doubted if you believe at all. Your faith journey to Bethlehem has taken you in so many directions that there have been times when you're not sure you're following the right star. Or worse, the star is so difficult to see that you're not sure it's even there. Yet somehow here you are, on Christmas morning; you've arrived at Bethlehem, and to you a Savior has been born.

The shepherds travel to Bethlehem by way of dramatic, heavenly revelation. At first they're terrified at the sight of the angel, but after

hearing the good news they're overjoyed and rush off to meet the Christ child. I must admit to being somewhat jealous of people who arrive at Bethlehem like the shepherds did. There's a sense of urgency and charisma for them, and their passion is unbridled. Perhaps your journey to Bethlehem has been like the shepherds. At first you felt a sense of fear. You didn't know what was happening to you or why or what to do with the news that had been brought to you. But once you overcame your initial fear you welcomed that good news with great joy. Your journey to Bethlehem has been an emotional one that is felt deeply in your heart. And now you, too, have arrived at Bethlehem this Christmas morning and find that the Savior has been born to you.

And then there are the countless people who arrive at Bethlehem like Mary did. Caught off guard by the angel's initial announcement, she travels to Bethlehem, just going about the business of life. All we know about the birth is that she delivered her firstborn son, wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger because there was no room at the inn. After everything leading up to the birth you'd think Luke would give us more details than this, but these two short verses are all we read of Christ's birth. Poor Mary is left to learn things on her own, but she doesn't get ruffled. She just goes about the business of life. Perhaps your journey to Bethlehem has been like that. Raised in the faith, you go about things in a customary manner, and the rituals are all too familiar to you. So when you wake up on Christmas morning, having arrived at Bethlehem, you aren't too surprised that to you a Savior has been born.

Isn't it wonderful how many different ways there are to get to Bethlehem? And we haven't even begun to touch the surface. Why, in Luke, we don't get to hear about the magi. They arrived at Bethlehem by their ability to interpret the movements of stars and planets and by the knowledge of the sages in Jerusalem. Serious study and scholarship mark the magi's journey to Bethlehem. People who travel to Bethlehem by this route have a voracious appetite for knowledge. They read and study and ask questions along the way. They want to know all there is to know. But even if they don't have all their questions answered, they too wake up on Christmas morning and find that a Savior has been born to them. They may not know how or why, but the Good News is told to them, too.

You see, (Alan and Reese) we all arrive at Bethlehem in different ways. Some people take the circuitous road and go from here to there and everywhere but they get there. Others rush in joy to Bethlehem, while others take the predictable path. And some people like to study the roadmap. But we all get there. And when we do we hear the angel and the multitude of heavenly hosts sing “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace and goodwill among all.” For to you a Savior has been born.

Bethlehem. It is that place where God came to us through the birth of a child. It is a place of mystery and wonder, far removed from the ordinary world in which we live. Angels populate the skies and may appear at any time to shepherds in the fields. Although there is a foreign king and an oppressive tax structure, the mother and father still hover over their firstborn child lying in a manger. This child will be the Messiah, the Savior for all the world. Born to you this day.

Yet don't let the fairy tale quality of the story fool you (Reese and Alan). For God came into human history completely helpless, as a newborn, and was laid in a feeding trough. God could have come in splendor, but instead God slipped unobtrusively into a small province far from the seat of earthly power. God was born on the road, and those who came to visit were shepherds and magi. No elaborate preparations were made for the birth.

This is important to note, because it shows us that God comes to people like us, which is to say ordinary people going about the ordinary business of life. And no matter how circuitous our journeys, we get to Bethlehem, or more importantly, Bethlehem gets to us.

You see, Reese and Alan, there will be times in your lives when you'll find the need to search for God. But I say to you, don't waste your time. Because you don't need to go searching for God like we go searching for the perfect Christmas gift, because God is here, God has come, God is with us. This is the miracle of the story, that God comes to us no matter where we are.

Joy to the world, we sing, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king!
That, my friends, is the beauty of Christmas. That no matter what
circumstance we may find ourselves in, and no matter how we get to
Bethlehem, God has come just like the angel said, for “to you is born this
day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

And so, Alan and Reese, wherever you go, remember that God is always
with you. God gave us all the sacrament of baptism today so that we might
all be strengthened and reminded of this, and rededicate ourselves to being
disciples of Christ.

Alan and Reese, may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord be kind
and gracious to you, and may the Lord look upon you with favor and bring
you peace today and every day.

Amen.

*A sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling, Pastor/Head of Staff of First
Presbyterian Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the occasion of Alan
Huffman's and Reese Huffman's baptisms.*