

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

December 24, 2022

Eve of the Incarnation, Luke 2:1-14

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us. *Amen.*

Merry Christmas, Trinity Church!

Whether you are an every-Sunday member of this congregation or you are returning after a time away; whether you are looking for a new worship home or are altogether new to faith; we welcome you *here*, where we assemble week after week to nurture Beloved Community – within these walls and beyond them. With gladness and singleness of heart, then, we encounter the very infant King we celebrate this holy night, and, when we gather, we tell stories – tales of the babe born in a manger, surely, and of our own experiences with that same *Immanuel*, the God who chooses to companion us through the ordinary of our lives.

Of the latter, it came to pass in those days that on a Friday, December 21, my wife, Missy, loaded the Buick with our nine-year-old son, our seven-year-old daughter, and a whole bunch of Christmas presents, all bound for a weekend trip to visit family. While they readied to make the gift-exchange rounds in Louisiana, I planned to drive to the Fredericksburg [Texas] Flea Market, an hour from where we lived at the time. See, Missy and her mother had adventured there the weekend after Thanksgiving, and Missy returned talking about an interesting light fixture she had seen. As a keen and clever husband, I made a mental note of her mention, and, with a thermos full of coffee and the sound of Santa's sleigh jingling in my ears, I headed west to find a treat for my daughter and to pick up the centerpiece of my bride's Christmas Day.

Mid-morning, I arrived to the "Trade Days," a setting you can imagine as a massive Tanglewood, only instead of green grass there's chalky dust, and instead of acoustically-engineered modern buildings there are guesstimated lean-tos, and instead of classical music devotees there are grizzled bargain hunters [you know, it's pretty much the same sort of thing]. Regular vendors with well-established booths plied their wares in one of six barns and several dozen shotgun storage buildings, while more ephemeral shops set up in tents pitched behind RVs with license plates from as far away as Washington state.

Vested in a Texas-December ensemble of short sleeves, Levi's, and a ballcap, I walked up and down the market's paths ... but found no sign of the light fixture Missy described. By lunchtime I began to feel the pressure of a Christmas now only days away. I sat down at a picnic table with a plate of cook-shack fare and took off my hat, ran my hands through my hair [there was more of it then] and assessed my situation.

I calculated what I'd spent on gas driving out there, added to that number what I'd paid for parking, subtracted the amount of time I'd already invested, and I realized that neither my wallet nor my calendar could afford a complete miss on my last available shopping opportunity. Finishing my brisket, I tugged on my cap's brim and resolutely stood from my seat. With a deep and dedicated breath, I rinsed my vision of any limitations: I stopped looking for *something*, and I just started *looking*, opening myself to the Christmas spirit.

I entered Barn #1 and found typically-Texan flea-market fare: stones engraved with shop-worn phrases, longhorns, and iron-worked stars artificially aged with a thin patina of rust. Barn #2 could have fallen out of a Hollywood backlot as the abandoned costume closet from *Little House on the Prairie*. I sighed.

With optimism dimming, a polite woman emerged from the country dresses to ask if I would like to sample some of her homemade, goat-milk lotion. Doing the social calculus on the fly, I decided that I could decline without offense, provided I took a moment to step into her booth, just the next one down the aisle. "No, thank you," I replied, smiling as warmly before entering her niche.

And then, through perfume plumes, a light shone: as clearly as the shepherds must have seen the star, I saw the claw-foot tub behind her desk and register, where, atop a pillowy pile of blankets, two baby goats slept, nuzzling one another about the ears.

"Ma'am, are these goats for sale?" I asked, my heart pounding in each syllable.

"Well, we're not allowed to sell livestock here, but we do sell baby goats – perhaps even these baby goats – though any sale, of course, would need to happen off the market's campus."

"I see. So, if a guy were going to buy a baby goat from you, how much would one like these cost him?"

"Well, first of all, he wouldn't be able to buy just one goat: goats are herd animals that will go mad if they don't have a companion. These are only 48- and 72-hours old, which means they will need to be fed by a bottle three times a day for the next six-to-eight weeks. If they were weaned, we would charge \$150, but I would let these go for \$20 ... if a guy were interested."

"What fortune!" I thought to myself: I could bring home not just *one* baby goat, but *two*! As she spoke, I pictured my daughter feeding these sweet creatures with a bottle. Behind her, I could see my wife, beaming with pride at the sight of Ginna caring for an animal, learning the value of responsibility, and exploring vocational possibilities: yes and Yes and YES! Ginna would probably write her college admissions essays on this experience of nurturing her baby goats, her *baby Christmas goats*! Our family would raise these goats *together*: giving them names, building them fences, watching them grow.

“Ma’am, my name is Morgan Allen, and I am not a rash man. I need to think about this for a few more minutes, but I am nearly certain I want these goats. May I put down \$10 as a deposit, to keep you from selling them while I make a couple of phone calls?” [I instinctively scanned the crowd for other interested goat buyers].

“You’ve got it, and no need for the \$10: I trust you, and the goats are yours, if you want them.”

I thanked the woman and left Barn #2 with a jingle in my step. I texted a friend in town, asking if he could look after two baby goats the evening of December 23 so that I could keep them a surprise for Christmas morning. Scarcely before I could press send, he offered an enthusiastic assent [I learned later that, less than he approved of the goat plan, he wanted to watch whatever was gonna happen next]. With fortune still smiling, this friend happens also to be a lawyer, so I asked if he knew whether it was legal to keep goats within the Austin city limits. He replied with the promise of a legal review, and I began calling Missy. She was going to be so surprised! Over and over again I dialed her number, but, over and over again, I caught only her voicemail. I texted her urgent messages explaining the goat opportunity, and I waited.

Within a few minutes, my lawyer friend called back and reported, “Now, this isn’t exactly graduate-with-honors legal counsel as my primary source is a newspaper report from a few years ago, but, according to the article, livestock is subject to specific guidelines if animals are to be kept within the city’s limits. The good news is that the yard at the rectory probably meets the standard, because you don’t have neighbors too nearby. Besides, someone would have to complain, and who is gonna lodge a protest about you raising goats in your backyard?”

“Great! Thank you for this help.” Hanging up the phone, I hurried back to Barn #2.

“Ma’am, a guy like me would like to buy some goats like these.”

“Then I suggest I drive you to your car!” she replied.

As we made the short trip to the edge of the campus, I asked, “So, what should I know about raising goats – you know, just right off the bat?”

“Well, goats know what to do to survive, provided you give them the right survival options. Be sure you feed them only whole, cow milk, if you can’t find goat milk. Organic, of course, would be even better: sometimes the pasteurization chemicals can upset their stomach. Here is my card; call me with any question you have.”

While some wise sliver of my conscience flickered reluctance at the mention of the goats’ digestive system, seeing the wee ones again quickly overcame any nascent negativity. I snapped a quick picture of the goats and texted away the images of these new additions. Driving back to Austin, I received calls from family and friends, asking on the happy news:

“Wait ... what? You bought goats?”

“I know! This is practically a Christmas miracle: I went for a lamp, and I am coming back with goats ... *baby goats* ... *baby Christmas goats!*”

“Did Ginna actually ask for goats?”

“Well, I mean, ‘Baby Goats’ wasn’t on her list, but what little girl and her dear mother wouldn’t want baby goats for Christmas?!”

“You mean Missy doesn’t know about this?”

That afternoon and evening were a busy blur of goat care and goat excitement. After picking up a gallon of organic milk at the grocery store, I bought some goat-nursing rubber nipples and a large wire cage at the feed store. Then, Missy returned my call.

“Do you really have two baby goats in your car?”

“I do! Can you believe it?!”

“No. No, I cannot believe it.”

“Missy, it’s gonna be great!” I went on, explaining to her my vision of goat care, the boon for our children, and the enhancement of our neighborhood. Still, I sensed her enthusiasm was slow coming. Fortunately, by this time she was in the car with her parents, and she could not voice aloud her perspectives of goat-rearing.

“It may take some time for her to come around,” I thought to myself. “Her trip to Shreveport may be very good for us: a good thing for me and a good thing for the goats.”

After more or less successfully giving the goats their first, messy bottles, I assembled the wire cage on the porch, snuggled the pair into a collection of blankets and towels, and retired to bed, exhausted. Sleepless and anxious that the kids would wake the neighbors, the humbling reality of my purchase began rooted into my psyche. As my eyes finally closed, I tangled with technicolor nightmares about ornery livestock and angry neighbors, confused children and a wounded marriage.

Before dawn, I brought the goats their morning bottles, and there, in the dark of the porch, I faced the hard reality that my career as a goat herder was coming to a close: it would be as brief as it had been hopeful. I made a fresh pot of coffee and sipped a cup while the goats snuggled me on the back steps. As soon as the day reached a polite hour, I rang the goat broker.

“Ma’am, I believe I have paid you for goat *rental*,” I nervously explained.

“Uh-oh ... that sounds like trouble,” a tinge of knowing coloring the edges of her words.

“Well, after sleeping on it, I don’t think I am going to be able to provide these goats the kind of life that they deserve. May I return them to you? ... You can certainly keep my money.”

“Well, I’m so glad you called: I would much rather those kids come back here than be in a situation that’s not good for them – or you. And we will give your money back. I am in Kerrville today at a different market, but you are welcome to return the goats to my husband, who is back at our Fredericksburg booth today.”

“Wow! Thank you for being so gracious. I’ll have you know that if I ever buy goats again, I am *definitely* going to buy them from you.”

Taking a fresh blanket from the wash, I made as cozy a bed as I could in the same box I had been given the day before. I collected my coffee and, once more, headed west, humbled and grateful and still without much of a gift for either Missy or Ginna.

As a preacher, I tell a lot of tales, and, for many years, I wrote and read a fictional piece on Christmas Eve [likely more believable than the for-real account you just heard] because I am utterly convinced that we most powerfully encounter *God’s* story in *our* story. By telling these tales, I intend to encourage us to recognize the holy in our ordinary world, the presence of God’s magic and majesty in our everyday lives.

For, see: the most vital, the most important theological text any of us will ever engage is our own life. We must come to recognize in it a tale full of characters modest and grand; of times fat and lean; of hopes fulfilled, emptied, and filled again. We must welcome each day as an occasion of Grace, and, *together*, we as the Body of God must unbind, uncover, and unmask that face of Christ, drawn into our countenance at the beginning of the world, for God loves that child – the one dreamt before time itself, loves her like the babe born in a manger, like the mother who bore him, like the father who knelt and held her hand.

And *Immanuel* – the God who is with us – is with us in the joy and in the grief, the frivolity and the solemnity and the absurdity of this and every season. Friends, the holy child seeks us among the goats, as among the shepherds, and *finds us*, ... even in a wrapped present beneath the tree ... a big box, say, large enough for livestock, but containing only perfumed lotion and that most desired of all holiday offerings: the gift of *not* receiving two baby goats for Christmas.

That we would know God’s Love this night and always,
I pray with gladness and singleness of heart,
Amen.