The Nativity of the Lord

When Jesus was born, some of the people there were inconvenienced, while others were struck with fear. Joseph and Mary had already marveled at the conception of this child and of his cousin John the Baptist. Now as Mary's pregnancy reached its final stages, Joseph learned he had to leave Nazareth, go to Bethlehem, and take his little part in Caesar Augustus's huge decree that "the whole world should be enrolled." The timing was bothersome, but Joseph dutifully packed up his family and went. Then, upon arrival, "there was no room for them in the inn," so Joseph was inconvenienced again—Mary even more so because "the time came for her to have her child." She gave birth, quietly wrapped up the child, "and laid him in a manger."

If this happened in America today, you could expect a public outcry about government overreach, the impossibility of enrolling the whole world, and the wastefulness of time and resources.You could also expect social media blasts about the heartlessness of the innkeeper, the inconsiderateness of other travelers who filled the inn ahead of a pregnant woman, the subsequent indignity of forced homelessness—even for a night, and childbirth without proper hygiene. When we are inconvenienced today, we feel angry inside and make it public outside. We complain until other people share our unhappiness. There's no hint of any of this in Luke's account of the journey to Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus. Joseph and Mary just do what they needed to do under the circumstances handed to them. There's no record of their complaints over the inconveniences.

Then, shepherds, minding their own business, were struck with fear. They saw an angel of the Lord above them and the glory of the Lord shining around them. The angel spoke to them—all of which I would find pretty frightening too. The angel's first words after the birth of this child were "Do not be afraid…. A savior has been born for you."

In America today, we are struck with fear over mass shootings and violence, the harm that may fall to our loved ones, financial instability, or terrorism. Some people attempt to calm these fears by stockpiling weapons, seeking revenge, reinforcing prejudices, justifying cruelty, cursing enemies, or retreating to pornography. The shepherds handled fear differently. They went over to take a look at the kid.

When Jesus was born, the world was not ready for him. The leader of government was too introspective. The host city lacked infrastructure. Workers were easily scared. It didn't matter to the Son of God. He came among us anyway. He grew up and taught us by his life, death and resurrection. When you encounter Jesus, you may find him inconvenient. When you encounter Jesus, you may be filled with fear. He has always had that kind of impact. But, as the angel said, "A savior has been born for you." His very presence is an invitation. He didn't come when we were financially secure, he didn't come when we had an opening on our schedule, he didn't come when we felt like having company, he didn't come when we were ready to welcome him; he came when he was ready to welcome us. In so many words, he says to each of us in the midst of our inconveniences and fears, "Come on over and take a look."