

Christmas. A story of a newborn baby and new parents. A story of people coming to extend their congratulations to the new family and pray for his safety and health. Gifts for the family and for the baby. A story we know well, acted out in our own lives and in the lives of friends and other family members.

A story that is both particular – it happened to a real family at a real time in history – and universal – it is a story that is replayed throughout the world every time a baby is born.

It is also cosmic. It is a tale of angels and shepherds and stars and magi. A story that has been told and retold, imagined in art, music, poetry, drama and hymns. Something new is happening here, something that is beyond the every day. The galaxy has been awakened – a star becomes convener and guide to shepherds and magi. Angels, those mystical creatures that tie heaven to earth, are singing songs of joy.

There is, however, a strange cast of characters. The shepherds. Not the elite in Bethlehem to welcome the Messiah, but stinky tenders of sheep, the homeless of the day who likely had no family because of the nomadic nature of their work and the filth in which they lived. Unnoticed and unappreciated people were the first to arrive.

And angels. Not your Hallmark version of creatures singing in ecstasy for eternity, making us feel good, but those terrifying beings who show up unannounced with proclamations that throw a person's life into disarray at God's bidding. Mary and Joseph have both already known life-altering encounters with angels.

Magi are on the way. Probably not wealthy, powerful kings, but itinerant traveling magicians who were looked upon contemptuously and seem to be fools in every sense of the word. Why else would they stop first at Herod's and ask where the new king might be?

A baby born in a barn surrounded by the stink of animals and welcomed to the world by a strange host of people. Not a birth that caught the eye of anyone who mattered but a star strangely able to communicate the importance of the event. And just how did Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, at the Emperor Augustus's command, too late to get a room at a decent place anyway? Did they have the typical argument – Joseph saying to Mary, "There's no way we can fit all of that on a donkey." Or was it by design? A birth in a barn to emphasize the depths at which God will go to make sure that all are included?

The Christmas story. God's story, at once an ordinary occurrence, something that happens around the world every second of every day, and a once-in-a-lifetime event that has importance for every life born into the world.

Mary, like all mothers, has high expectations for her child. When greeting her cousin Elizabeth who is pregnant in her old age with John, she sings a song of praise to God, which is also a song of hope for the child she carries, her Jesus. He will turn the world

upside down, help the downtrodden and lift up the poor. He will right the wrongs in the world and bring those in power to their knees. The angel promises her that he will be given the throne of David, with implications that the people of Israel will no longer be subject to the oppression of the Romans, Babylonians and anyone else who might take them captive and restrict their ability to worship God.

And the baby Jesus does grow up, and he does stir things up in his world, but not in a way that is expected. He confronts the leadership of his religion and calls them back to the basic tenets of his faith – to love the Lord with all your strength. To love self. And to love neighbor. His power is not to garner military support to shore up strength against the oppressors. Not that he couldn't have.

But God's way is not the way of the world. God's way is the way of mercy, of justice for all people, of love – not of violence.

The story begs the question, though. What difference has the birth of the Christ child made for the life of the world? Particularly now, when we see the Middle East, the birthplace of Jesus, in another devastating war.

How does the birth we celebrate tonight make a difference? Is what Mary sings about coming to pass, or is it just a fantasy that she sings about, one that we would all like to see happen but is not real?

I am not a scholar who knows how the world has changed in the millennia since the birth of the person we call our savior. Obviously, violence persists. The nation of Israel, the world, is not free of violence, nor has the throne of David been restored. We know that.

But here's what else I do know. Most, maybe all religions tell a birth story of their hero. This story, our story, is radically different. It is a story of power through the love and the sacrifice of the savior, through God who is willing to be vulnerable and enter into the world and all of its imperfections, and yes, in the presence of violence. It is a story of paying attention to the least of these. It reflects the most important teachings of Jesus – to care for the sick, the lonely, the poor, the needy, and the unloved – they are even at his side to welcome him to this world.

I also know that God is real, as real as the fireflies that light up the night. We can't see the firefly in the sky but we know they're there because of the flicker of their light. God's presence is around us as a flicker of light that we glimpse here and there. Maybe we can't prove it – many have tried. But we can experience it, and I have. I hope you have, too.

As for violence and all of the evil in the world, I don't know why that's so. Again, many have tried to explain it and there are some good thoughts about it. But no one really knows. I do know that in God's time, all of creation will be healed of the need for violence and hatred. God will have the last word.

So, tonight, believe. Believe in angels, and shepherds, and magi and stars that guide us.

Believe in the miraculous and the fantastic, and the power of a child to bring light and love into a world sorely in need of both. Believe in God, who loves you enough to give his life for you.

Tonight, on Christmas, we celebrate the light that has shined in the darkness, a light that the darkness has not and will not overcome. Thanks be to God.