

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

In the hands of God. The songwriter tells us, "He's got the whole world in his hands.... the itty bitty baby..... you and me brother,everybody here in his hands."

The writer of Psalm 139 declares: "If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there you hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

God's people have always known they were in the hands of God.

But tonight we celebrate the beginning of a story no one had even dreamed: God in the hands of humans.

When Jesus was not yet born, the hand of the emperor, Augustus, signed a decree that all the world should be registered. Even before Jesus was born, human hands were changing his life. Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem because of what the emperor had written.

Augustus took no thought of what his counting would mean for a woman soon to deliver a child. So it is so often when our lives are in human hands.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, hands did not open doors for them. An innkeeper pointed to a place out back, a place where cattle were fed.

There Jesus was born, born into the hands of Joseph. Rough hands, hands skilled with saw and hammer, but never before opened to receive a new human life. The only Son of God was cradled in those powerful hands, gently held.

From Joseph's hands, given into Mary's hands - Mary, held her son, nursed him - from her own body nourishing his life. God's Son was safe in those hands.

Those hands had made preparation for this moment, bringing strips of cloth from home with which to wrap the newborn child. And so Mary cared for this little one; hands confidently, firmly wrapping - surrounding the Son of God in a womb of cloth to keep him warm from the night's chill. Then she placed him in the manger.

Nearby hands stained by the lanolin in sheep's wool were being held up in fear - brightness greater than sunshine flooded the night. An angel, a messenger from God, spoke, "Do not be afraid, for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Then the joy of heaven erupted in brightness and song: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those who he favors."

I don't know if shepherds held the newborn child when they found him in his manger bed. I like to think so. Hands accustomed to holding and helping newborn lambs, holding the one who would be known as the lamb of God. Luke tells us the shepherds spoke of what they had been told about this child. Then they returned to the pastures, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen.

Tonight we give thanks that God entrusted God's Son to human hands, to Mary, and Joseph, and shepherds.

Yet human hands will not always deal so gently with God's Son. They day will come when hands will grasp him, arrest him, hold his arms as nails are pounded into his hands, his feet. Human hands will hoist the cross up into to air. Human hands will do nothing to save him from death. When Jesus has taken his last breath once more gentle hands will hold his body,

wrap his lifeless body in strips of cloth, place it in a cave maybe not so different from the cave stable in which his eyes first opened.

From Joseph's hands to soldier's hands to Joseph of Arimathea's hands in whose tomb Jesus was buried - this would be the story of God in human hands.

But all along Jesus would be in the hands of his Father in heaven. The emperor Augustus was not in charge that Christmas night, but God bringing Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. Pilate's decree of death would not be the last word, but the Father's voice, calling his Son out of death into life once more. No human hands could destroy what God was doing through his Son.

Take a look at the hands that are yours. Some of your hands have been gentle, cradling babies. Some of your hands have been raised in anger; some have even struck those whom God has put in your care. Some of your hands have done productive work, helping, providing, sawing boards, cooking meals. Some of your hands have killed an enemy in war.

God intends to save all of you in Jesus Christ. That is why God put God's Son into human hands, to save you from sin, from death.

God sent God's Son into this world to grab hold of you, and hang onto you through all of life and through death and into life once more. God wants to wrap you in Jesus, you will always be safe in him.

Hold Mary's child, God's Son in your heart this night. Hold him close in faith. For through him God is holding you and will keep on holding you through life, through death, and into life with God forever.