

Christmas Day 2019
Luke 2:8-20
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace, peace, and joy to you from the miracle of God incarnate. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" Merry Christmas to you whom are favoured among all people! *"Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."* Let's pray:

"Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place." That's what the shepherds said after the angels had left them and gone into heaven. The shepherds couldn't just hear the good news; they couldn't just receive the birth announcement. Somewhere deep inside, the shepherds wanted to be a part of this thing that had taken place. The angel's good news wasn't just an announcement, it was a calling. They had to go and see. They left their fields and went to the manger. They moved from the event of Jesus' birth to the experience of his birth. They made the Christmas story their own. That's what I hope we'll do today.

I don't want us to just talk about Bethlehem, I want us to go there. I don't want us to work out the meaning *of* "this thing that has taken place." I want us to find meaning *in* "this thing that has taken place." I want us to walk with the shepherds to the experience of Christmas.

So, what's your Christmas story? I'm not talking about your family traditions, the gifts, the food, or the way you celebrate Christmas, and I don't want you to retell the Christmas story. I want you to think about *your* Christmas story. When have you, like the shepherds, gone "to Bethlehem [to] see this thing that has taken place?" I want to hear about a day when your life cradled new life, new hope, new possibilities like the manger of Christ's birth.

I want you to think about your Christmas story because I think we often leave out a crucial part of it. We always name Mary, Joseph, Jesus, angels, shepherds, wise men. But what about you and me? Aren't we essential characters in the story? I sometimes wonder if we focus on the details of Jesus' birth, the event, to such a degree that we leave ourselves out of the story. When that happens, we deny ourselves the experience of Christmas and Christmas is just another historical event. We may as well sing *Happy Birthday* as *O come, all ye faithful* [unless you're Pauline Young].

How about not limiting the beauty and breadth of the Christmas story to the historical details of Jesus' birth!?! It's bigger than that. It's more than that. Yes, Jesus' birth happened in a specific place, at a specific time, to a specific woman – but it doesn't mean his birth is historically confined. It means that we must look for and experience his birth in the circumstances of our own lives. Christ is born in the harsh and demanding conditions of everyday life, his and ours, then, now, and in the future.

See, Westerners are conditioned to think of time and events as a linear progression from one thing to another, a simple line of events – like a string pulled tight. The past is past, the future is future, and the present is present. Everything stays where it should. But here in the church, and especially in our worshipping life together, it's much more like taking that string and bunching it together in our hands [and in our prayers and songs] so that what happened thousands of years ago touches what happens now which touches prayers from the early church which touches God's kingdom reality in what we think of as our future. Here, in this place, time doesn't stay in a neat line, but instead, is what Doctor Who would call, "wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey stuff." All touching together.

So, where do we go to see this thing that has taken place and what does it look like? How about starting with your life. What does the manger of your life hold? Hope, fear, joy, sorrow? Maybe grief and loss lie at the centre of your life. Maybe it's thanksgiving and abundance. Maybe it's emptiness, a lack of meaning, or darkness that lie in your manger. Are you holding guilt, resentment, regret? Is

your manger full of pain? Where does it hurt? What concerns occupy your mind? What lies in the cradle of your life? Whatever it is, whatever your circumstances are this morning, that is the manger in which you will find the Christ-child.

The manger of your life and the manger of Christ are connected. They are two ways of considering the same thing. For if Christ is not born in the real-life, everyday circumstances of our lives, he isn't born anywhere.

From that one manger we are all given new life, new hope, new possibilities. And there's a whole lot more than our circumstances and a baby in that manger. The manger holds more than we can see. It held more than the shepherds could see.

That night, the shepherds went to Bethlehem to see this thing that had taken place and they found "the child lying in the manger," but they had no idea how much more that manger held:

- It held the peace with which Jesus calmed the storms;
- It held the bread and fish that fed the multitudes;
- It held the new eyes by which the blind man saw;
- It held the new legs with which the lame man walked;
- It held the living water given to the Samaritan woman at the well;
- It held the freedom given to the woman caught in adultery;
- It held the beatitudes;
- It held the tears Jesus wept over Jerusalem;
- It held Lazarus' new life;
- It held the cross that destroyed death;
- It held the "Father forgive them" that Jesus uttered from the cross;
- It held the open tomb of resurrection;
- It held the bread of life and the cup of salvation that here in a few minutes we will eat and drink;
- It held the shepherds before God and God before the shepherds. And it still does today.

Christ's manger, our manger, holds all this and more. It did for the shepherds and it does for us today. The manger has never been emptied of its power and meaning, and never will be. It's the place where God's life and our lives intersect. It's the place where our lives are fed and sustained in the midst of, and sometimes, in spite of our situations. How could it be anything less than that? After all, a manger is a feeding trough and this one stands in Bethlehem, the House of Bread.

So:

- whenever you've experienced your life being nourished, grown, enlarged;
- anytime you've received or offered forgiveness;
- when you've seen the world with new eyes;
- whenever you've awakened to a deeper and more profound meaning of your life;
- every time you've united yourself with the pain of the world;
- wherever you've experienced the light pushing back darkness;
- when the impossible became a reality;
- when you've looked in the face of another and seen the holy;
- whenever you've joined your life to another's and held nothing back;
- when consolation and strength carried you through loss and sorrow;
- anytime you feel yourself to be loved not because of what you have done or might do, but simply because you exist;
- whenever you've remembered and reclaimed yourself as a beloved daughter or son of God;

Whenever you've experienced any one of those or a thousand other things like them, you have gone to Bethlehem and seen this thing that has taken place. It's Christmas and Christ is born anew in your time, in your place, in you.

There is no single Christmas story. There are an endless number of Christmas stories and they are happening all the time. There are at

least as many Christmas stories here this morning as there are people. Remember what the angel told the shepherds, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people." Not some people, not just the good people, not only the believing people - all people. No one is left out. So, tell me, when have you been to Bethlehem? What did you see? What did you experience?

What is your Christmas story? How is Christ born in you today?
Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, the Everliving, Everlasting Christmas Story. Amen.

