

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, the time has finally arrived. If it has not been purchased, packed, wrapped, baked, decorated or mailed by now, it is probably not going to be, so let us give it a rest. Let us give it a rest. Set that stuff aside as we gather to consider the event that changed the course of human history forever. Consider the event?

We know this holiday....or so we think....with its expectations, its promise and its heritage, its memory and its mystery. And so the season of anticipation is crowded with assumption, one being the anticipation of hearing an old story retold. If we know it, how do we know it?

"In those days...", it begins. Rome is the center of the known world, and the emperor's title is "Son of God." Acting as the Son of God, Augustus declared that his whole realm should be counted and measured, an act of control and power coming out from Rome. So, it causes Joseph to go to Bethlehem, which was nowhere. You have this juxtaposition of all this Roman power and these two simple people who go to this out-of-the-way place, and there the savior of the world is born.

And born into a lowly situation..."she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn." This is the gospel in miniature....the birth that tells us everything about the gospel:

First, there is no room at the inn. It is in the nature of the Messiah that he is always the one left out. He is the stone the builders rejected. That there is no room in the inn is not incidental to the story; this is what the Messiah is. There is no room in Rome, so go to Israel. There is not room in Israel, so go to Nazareth. No room in Nazareth, so go to Bethlehem. No room in the inn, so go out to the shed where the animals are. Out, out, out, out....the Messiah is the one left out. The real truth breaks in on us when we recognize that the rejected one is the cornerstone.

Second, who first gets wind of this? The shepherds. Shepherds in the first century were the unwashed, the unscrupulous. People locked their doors when they came into town. Uneducated, irreligious, uncouth and unlikely, but it was to them that the news came first. Of course, they were terrified but after the angels left, the shepherds said to one another "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing which the angel has made known to us." And they went! The shepherds actually went...and went with haste....because they were shepherds. They did not form a committee, or stop to consider the economic impact, or take a poll, or call in consultants, or request more information from the angels. Surprise again! They went. With haste. Immediately. It did not matter that they had the social mark of gypsies, with a very low social status. Luke always turns the social order on its head...always interested in the women, the outcast, the powerless. So, the angel appears to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid!"

Shepherds can find the child by two signs, one with the deeper implication of swaddling clothes, which was the culture of that day and place. The bands of cloth were used to shape the child physically, a way of physically forming the child. When we say that Jesus takes on human form, this story shows us that it includes being enculturated.

Culture shapes us spiritually. And, like us, Jesus also was a product of culture and not just nature. It is not like today in which we apologize for culture. Mary would not look over to Joseph and say, "Well, maybe we should let him decide for himself. Let us not cram anything down his throat." Today, we think that somehow the blank slate is preferable, but Jesus himself is swaddled...he is enculturated, he begins his preparation to go out into the world.

The manger is a feeding trough, a place where the animals come to eat. How appropriate that, at the end of the gospel, the disciples of Emmaus find Jesus in the breaking of bread, at an eating place. Just as we find Jesus at the altar, with the breaking of the bread tonight. Where do you find him?

Finally, we hear that Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Not her head, but in her heart.

One of the greatest theologians that ever lived, Karl Barth, was asked to be a guest lecturer at the University of Chicago Divinity School. At the end of a closing lecture, the president of the seminary announced that Dr. Barth was not well and was quite tired, and then he said, "Therefore, I will ask just one question on behalf of all of us." He turned to the renowned theologian and asked, "Of all the theological insights you have ever had, which do you consider to be the greatest of them all?"

The perfect question for one who had written literally tens of thousands of pages of some of the most sophisticated theology ever put into print. The students held pencils tight, ready to take down verbatim the premier insight of the greatest theologian of their time. Karl Barth closed his tired eyes, and he thought for a minute, and then he half smiled, opened his eyes, and said to those young seminarians,

"The greatest theological insight that I have ever had is this: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

That the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest love story ever written. I wish with all my heart that everybody could read it that way, but there are people for whom it reads more like a used car contract. Somehow, within all those beautiful love verses, they hear only clauses and conditions and the spelling out of all the consequences should any or those clauses and conditions ever be infringed.

So, I thank God that Christmas comes around once a year to remind us that God is not in the business of keeping books and tallying ledgers, nor is God concerned about our status or position in life. If so, the Christ of God would never have been born into such circumstances as we find in the second chapter of Luke. No, Christmas is the beginning of a classic love story with all the right ingredients: infatuation, pursuit, risk and relationship...

But in all relationships of love, there does have to be that first meeting...right? When I was a child, and even now, I wonder "what if I had been adopted by another set of parents? I would never have known the love of the parents I know and love now, even though they have passed on.

Do you ever find yourself asking those kinds of questions? "What if I had gone to another college in another part of the country? What if I had taken a job instead of going to school? What if my family never moved into the North Country and I never met my future wife? Our lives might have never crossed paths"

Christmas is a crossing of paths. Christmas is where we find the Christ of God intersecting with humanity. Right from the get-go, our centuries-old Eucharistic Prayer sung this day, sings praise to the God who created heaven and earth, and then made us for himself. Christmas is our first best meeting with the God who has desired us from the very beginning. If it were not for Christmas, we might never have known the intensity of the love that God has for us.

Mary and Joseph, far from home because of imperial rule, a peasant mother giving birth in unsanitary substandard housing. No fanfare, no royal delegation. They just laid him in that manger and they watched his face, listening for his breathing, just like every new parent does. True love accepts the beloved for who they really are, and the birth of that love into our world we celebrate tonight! Who would have ever guessed that this crossing of paths, this intersection of the divine and the human, would take place so long ago in a remote, speck of dust village called Bethlehem of Judea?

Who would have guessed it? That in that time and place One would be born into our world who would one day fill his life so much with the experience of God, so much with the love of God, that in him thousands upon thousands would be moved to make the incredible claim that they had actually met their God in person?

May God bless each of you and those you love this Christmas! Like the shepherds, we can come to know that the world has suddenly changed, and we want to celebrate that fact. A Savior has been born, one who will bridge the gap. The one who gets us from here to there. Now that God has touched us with a promise that has taken root in our hearts, we can go and check it out. Because, even though we are ordinary....like simple shepherds...a Savior has been born for us, and we have a reason to celebrate...every single day, but especially this day.

The baby is no longer in his mother's womb, but now let loose upon the world. The silent night is at an end...brought to you by a child who only seeks to heal, and to give hope...and to lead each of us into the loving embrace of God, who we know to be as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.