

Christmas Eve, 11p.m. Service

Christmas is the celebration of the Christ Child, the Messiah, the son of God. It is the birthday of Jesus. It is beautiful, spirit filled, uplifting, filled with hope, love, joy, peace, and maybe a little stress, some overspending, and some glitz.

We gather with family, with friends, and with traditions that have been with us for a lifetime. But sometimes, the story is still hard to approach. We get the cookies and the meals right. We get the house decorated and the presents wrapped. We sing Christmas Carols, send cards, and shop, but we still don't quite enter into the story.

Why is that? What keeps us from fully investing ourselves in this miracle? I think part of it is how vulnerable many in the story are. If we are vulnerable enough to imagine their circumstances, what might that do to our emotions? What might that do to our faith?

We know what a nativity scene looks like. We know all the main characters, the setting, and all that goes with it. And yet, at times, we still struggle to grasp the full meaning. Where do we fit into the story? How do we picture ourselves within the nativity?

Do you fit with the Holy Family? A young woman, pregnant. Her fiancé, not the father. At that time, her pregnancy would have been considered adultery and punishable by being stoned to death. Mary, a young girl, probably unsure of herself, and now being asked to do an extraordinary thing. Could she do it? Joseph, who must buck social norms to protect Mary and live into God's call. They would have been very poor. And at the end of Mary's pregnancy, they had to travel.

The baby was born in a politically difficult time when many in the population were being oppressed. This child was born in a smelly and unclean place, although we've cleaned it up a lot in our nativity scenes. As time passed, the family would have to live in exile, hiding from Herod who murdered children under the age of two to protect his power from the 'new born king'. This child, unlike others, who would be "Emmanuel" -God with us. Can we find ourselves in the poor, young, family who lived through very difficult situations?

What about the shepherds? Maybe we can find a place with them. They were watching their flocks by night - keeping the sheep safe. Shepherds had huge social stigma attached to them. They weren't trusted, weren't valued, and had very little. The shepherds were the

lowest on the social scale, and the shepherds that we are speaking about tonight were the night shift shepherds- the lowest of the low. And yet, the angels appeared to them and told them first. They got to share the Good News. They got to be some of the first visitors to the new born King. Maybe we enter into the story like an unseen shepherd.

And what about those angels? Their job was to sing, to celebrate and to share the Good News. Maybe we can see ourselves as an angel; sharing God's light and God's joy in the world. And it was probably fun to startle the shepherds, too. "Be not afraid!" the angel thundered, and then to the heavenly host ("you shouldda seen the look on that guys' face"). Do we see ourselves as the angels, rejoicing over the new babe?

Maybe we're like the innkeeper who didn't have any more room. No room at the inn, no room in our schedules, our hearts, our lives...

Maybe we're like the wise men who were always searching, always traveling, always seeking. Hoping to find the missing piece, the answer to life's big questions. They would have had money and an education. People would have been mystified by them, maybe a little scared of them or intimidated in their presence. But with their fortune, their quest, and their deep desire to learn, they also bring their best gifts and bow before a child. Are we like the wise men, humble, sharing our best, and being in awe in the presence of holiness.

There are lots of ways for us to be part of the story, more characters, more possibilities. But we have to be intentional about doing it. The story isn't just about one night or the birth of a child. The story isn't told to make us sentimental, it is told to remind us to be part of God's continuing miracle.

In your bulletin you will find a small slip of paper. On that slip of paper is a character from our Christmas story. As the scriptures are read and songs are sung, look for your character. What are they doing? What are they thinking? What is happening to them? As the Christmas story is read and sung, listen, think, and feel like your character.

So, tonight we're going to hear the story again. And we're going to imagine our place in it. Experiencing God's miracle first hand. And not just being a witness to it, but being moved to live faith differently because we've experienced the presence of God in the Christmas story.

We have read and sung our Christmas story. Which character were you? Where did God speak to you in a new way? What part of the miracle made sense in a more personal way? How will your life be changed because God loves you so much, he sent his son into the world?

Christmas isn't just for children; it's for all of us. So I invite you to put yourself in the story of Jesus' nativity. Jesus is not simply born to Mary. He is born to us, if only we use our imagination!

Are you King Herod, fearful of losing power or privilege as God is doing a "new thing"? Or an Eastern sage seeking a star of inspiration? A shepherd routinely going about your business when the skies seem to open up? A prophet crying in the wilderness?

Are you a religious leader holding on to tradition at all costs? A shop owner too busy and missing the unfolding miracle? Or an inn keeper whose life is too full to welcome a homeless, unwed mother-to-be? Joseph, serving quietly on the periphery of the sacred drama? Mary, with an unsought calling to do the painful and lonely work of birthing a new movement? Or a vulnerable child born into a cruel and violent world? Truth is, over a lifetime, we may play all of these roles in this story.

Our lives might not be perfect. We might be facing something difficult. Maybe tonight you need God's peace. Maybe tonight you need God's forgiveness and grace. Maybe tonight you need a spiritual swift kick to get your faith moving. The gift we receive tonight is the invitation to be part of God's miracle. To witness love of such magnitude that it begins to spill out of us and into the world.

God didn't send a child into the world so that we could have a lovely evening with candle light, decorations, and pretty songs. God sent a child into the world to show us the way; to challenge us to live faith in a way that leads to more miracles in the world. To find our place in the story.

When we look at our Christmas story in a new way, when we let the story get to us, and when we see ourselves in it- the story changes us! It inspires us! This inspiration will call us to put faith into action. It will challenge us to live in a way that leads to more miracles in the world. Because God's miracles take place when we allow God to work through us. The question is... are we willing to let God use us? Are you willing to be a miracle?

Christmas is the celebration of a miracle. Miracles don't just happen; they are born through action. Action can be uncomfortable, and even painful sometimes. Doing what God calls us to do can be overwhelming and frightening. But if we are willing to go through with it, God will create miracles in us. Emmanuel has come to move us out of our comfort zones.

It can be very difficult to live with the faith of Mary or Joseph. To follow blindly with expectation like the wise men. To live humbly like the shepherds. To celebrate with joy and singing like the angels. The Christmas story inspires us to live into the story- to act in a way that creates miracles. If we are willing to do all that we can, God will do all that we can't.

Every spirit-filled Christian has the potential for a God movement within him or her. The miracle is conceived and delivered through ordinary people who are willing to dream God's dreams and then act on God's vision. Mary was an unknown person from a little unknown town engaged to Joseph, an unimportant man. And yet through these nobody's from nowhere, came the most significant miracle of them all: Jesus, Emmanuel- God with us.

Are you ready for God to birth a Christmas miracle through you?

Let us serve His Only Begotten Son with all the devotion our hearts can muster, with all the appreciation our minds can gather, with all the effort our strength can marshal. May we gladly submit to the babe of Bethlehem that we may one day be like Him. May we be ready to be and share a Christmas miracle.

At this Christmas season and always, come, let us adore Him. Amen.