

“Let’s Go to Bethlehem”

There were many different reactions to the birth of that special baby so many years ago. We hear in Scripture about Mary, who pondered what had happened and treasured the memories of it. We hear about the angel herald who announced the good news, and the angel chorus that sang God’s praises. We hear about the shepherds to whom they came, who immediately went out in search of the baby, and we hear how they shared the news with many. We hear also about the Magi, who made the long journey in order to present their generous gifts to the young king.

And our Christmas celebrations are as diverse. For some, it’s holiday parties and dinners. For others, it’s trimming the tree and decorating the house. Some celebrate Christmas by singing carols. Some focus on exchanging gifts. Some gifts are simple, some homemade, some elaborate, some store-bought. And for many, the Christmas season incorporates many of these various aspects.

The same is true of our worship at this time of year. During some services, we sing loudly like the angel choir. Trumpets blare, and the volume of the organ notches up a bit. This reflects our joy regarding the good news of Christmas. But our Christmas Eve service tonight, you may have noticed, has a different feeling than that. Different instruments, different volume level. That is not to say that one approach is better or that one is more suited to the Christmas message. As a matter of fact, I can tell you that if you join us tomorrow on Christmas Day, you’ll notice the difference between these services. But a service like this one that is quieter, a little more low-key, gives us the opportunity to ponder, like Mary did, the meaning of Christmas in our own hearts and lives.

Tonight I’d like to say to you, along with the shepherds of the Christmas Gospel, “Let’s go to Bethlehem.” Let’s leave behind the loud announcement of the angel and the thunderous song of the angelic choir. Let’s walk the dusty streets and the dark roads. Let’s search out a reasonably quiet barn. And let’s go there for the same reason that the shepherds did, to see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

And yes, I know that God didn’t send his angel directly to you or to me to announce this good news. But he has told us. In fact, he has been telling people about this event since the very beginning. He promised the offspring of a woman. He promised that his birth would be in Bethlehem. He promised, as we heard this evening in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “[T]o us a child is born, to us a son is given” (9:6). And God brought you tonight to listen once more not only to the prophecies, but also to their fulfillment.

The Lord has told us about this night because we needed this night. He spoke of it first to Adam and Eve when they disobeyed him. He has spoken the same promise in different words to generation upon generation of people who have turned against him in sin and unbelief. He spoke these words of promise to engender faith and to offer comfort. He made these promises so that we would not be trapped in our sins and in the consequences that they deserve. He made these promises to call us out of darkness and into his wonderful light, to give us hope and salvation.

And even though it wasn’t for us to witness that first Christmas, God saw to it that we heard what the angels said, and that we have all the information we need to travel in spirit with the shepherds.

So when we go to Bethlehem, we find a baby. He is wrapped, just as the angels told us, in strips of cloth. And as strange as it may seem, he is lying in a manger. He’s there with his mother, Mary, who looks to many of us barely old enough to be a mother at all. She’s exhausted not only from the birth of her child, but also from the long journey of the days prior. She sits and watches in awe as shepherds venture in and in whispered voices tell her what happened to them out on the hills. Joseph is there, too. He is still trying to figure out as best as he can how to be an earthly father to a child that is not his, and to obey the laws of men that have brought him so far from the home that he and Mary will one day share. He has been working hard to make Mary comfortable on the long journey, and to find a place where they can sleep at peace in

his crowded ancestral home. Part of him is clearly worried that this throng of shepherds is an unwanted intrusion to the rest that everyone so desperately needs, but when he hears the stories, he, too, is filled with awe. The shepherds are seeking the child for the rest that they so desperately need. And God wanted to make certain that they found it.

In spite of everything, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds are all focused mainly on one thing, and that is the baby in the manger. Let's look at him, too. You've seen babies before. You know how cute and precious they can be. But there is only one baby like this one. You wouldn't know it from looking at him, but you remember, don't you, what the angels said? This is the one. This is the Christ. The Savior was born today, and now you are looking down on his face.

In the quiet of this night you get to ponder in amazement that this little child was born for all people of the entire world. On this dark night, you have seen the light of the world. And from that humble beginning in Bethlehem, that light is going to shine. It will shine on and in the hearts of his followers, even as the darkness of sin and unbelief rages against it. That battle will take the light of the world to the cross where even in the middle of the day the sun itself refused to shine. And at the death of the one whose birth we are celebrating tonight, while it may have seemed that the darkness had overcome, it was he who triumphed over sin and death and hell. And he rose to life three days later.

And his light continues to shine in hearts and lives and as he is shared with others, just like the light of a candle that is passed from one worshipper to the next in our celebration this evening.

So let's go to Bethlehem on this silent night, this holy night. But not only on this night. Whenever we are overwhelmed with sorrow, let's go to Bethlehem. Whenever grief or loss overtakes us, let's go to Bethlehem. Whenever you feel alone or helpless, go to Bethlehem. There you will see that God is with you, that he sent his own Son to be your Savior, that the light has indeed shined on our dark world.

Let's go to Bethlehem, and let's take Bethlehem with us in our hearts throughout our lives. As Martin Luther put it in his Christmas hymn, in a stanza that we didn't sing this evening: "Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled Within my heart, made clean and new, A quiet chamber kept for you."

The Text: Luke 2:1–20 (NIV84)

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to his own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.