

*“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. It wasn’t enough to just hear the good news. It wasn’t enough to just receive the birth announcement. Somewhere deep within they 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 and in so doing 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 will do this Christmas.

I want us to be like the shepherds. I don’t want us to just talk about Bethlehem; I want us to go there. I don’t want us to figure 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 move from the event of Christmas to the experience of Christmas.

So let me start by asking each one of us a question. What is our Christmas story? I am not asking about our family traditions, the gifts we exchange, the food we eat, or the way we celebrate Christmas, and I am not asking about the Christmas story as recorded in the Bible. I am asking about your Christmas story and mine. When have we, like the shepherds, gone “to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place?” I want to hear about a time when you knew your life to be the manger of Christ’s birth. Tell me about a day when your life cradled new life, new hope, and new possibilities.

The reason I am asking about your Christmas story is because I think we often leave ourselves out of the Christmas story. We always name Mary, Joseph, Jesus, angels, shepherds, and wise men. But what about you and me? Do we name ourselves as essential characters and participants in the story? I sometimes wonder if we have become the forgotten characters of the Christmas story. I sometimes wonder if we focus on the particulars of Jesus’ birth, the event, to such a degree

that we omit ourselves from the story. When that happens we deny ourselves the experience of Christmas and Christmas is just another event in history. We might as well sing Happy Birthday as O Come All Ye Faithful.

Let's not do that. Let's not limit the beauty of the Christmas story to the historical particularities of Jesus' birth. It's bigger than that. It's more than that. That Jesus' birth happened within a particular set of circumstances – a specific place, a specific time, a specific woman – doesn't mean his birth is limited to, defined by, or contained only within those circumstances. It means, rather, that we must look for and experience his birth in the particular circumstances of our own lives. Christ is born in the particularities of life, his and ours, then and now.

So where do we go to see this thing that has taken place and what does it look like? Start with the circumstances of your life. What does the manger of your life hold? Hope, fear, joy, sorrow? Maybe grief and loss lie at the center of your life. Maybe it is full of thanksgiving and abundance. Maybe it is emptiness, a lack of meaning, or darkness that lies in your manger. Are you holding guilt, resentments, regrets? Is your manger full of pain? Where does it hurt? What concerns fill your life? What lies in the cradle of your life? Whatever it is, whatever your circumstances are this Christmas that is the manger in which you will find the Christ child.

The manger of your life and the manger of Christ are not separate. They are two ways of seeing and describing the same thing. There is only one manger. For if Christ is not born in the everyday circumstances of our lives he isn't born anywhere.

From that one manger we are all given new life, new hope, and new possibilities. You see, that one manger holds more than circumstances and a baby. It always 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 5000;

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 said 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 is the place where God’s life and our life meet. It is the place where our lives are fed and sustained in the midst of and sometimes in spite of our life’s circumstances. How could it be anything less than that? After all a manger is just a feeding rack and this one stands in Bethlehem, the House of Bread.

So whenever you have experienced your life being nourished, grown, enlarged; anytime you have received or offered forgiveness; when you have seen the world with new eyes; whenever you have awakened to a deeper and more profound meaning of your life; every time you have united yourself with the pain of the world; wherever you have experienced the light pushing back darkness; when the impossible became a reality; when you have looked in the face of another and seen the holy; whenever you have 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 are; whenever you have remembered and reclaimed yourself as a beloved daughter or son of God; whenever you have 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 is Christmas and Christ has been born anew in your time, your place, your life.

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 today 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 the believing people only; 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? Amen.