

News of Great Joy

Do you hear that? I can hear singing. Can you feel the air vibrating? All of heaven and earth are throbbing with joy. Tonight, not only we but Christians everywhere are singing, praying and worshipping at an unlikely altar: the manger where our God came to live among us. This darkened evening, the almost 2 billion Christians around the globe will join together in small buildings like this one to play midwife to the coming Christ Child, to watch and pray over his birth, and to usher in the dawn of his coming. Perhaps the same "multitude of the heavenly host" who appeared to the shepherds 2000 years ago are singing with us, just for old time's sake: "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, and good will toward men."

Why does the Christmas nativity narrative call to us so clearly? Why does this restrained, pared-down story of "shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night" move us so deeply? I don't know about you, but I would have been happy to hear (Reader) read this story 5 times in a row. This simple story has tremendous power, and no matter how many times we hear it, it never loses its magic. It never seems old or tired. It is so ancient, and yet so new.

But why? After all, there is nothing glittery or showy about the way Luke describes birth of Jesus. There is probably a reason Disney never tried to animate Christmas and sell it on DVD. In fact, I think the Christmas Story may be the one tale that the Disney Company has *not* tried to make a profit from. But it's easy to see why. There is nothing here that glitters, not even a single princess, a sad lack of flying carpets and enchanted castles, and a complete absence of singing dwarves.

There are just some shepherds – poor, simple folk who live in the fields and sleep with their animals (and let's be honest: they probably haven't seen a bar of soap in years). There is a pregnant unmarried teenager who spends most of the story on a donkey before eventually giving birth, alone and unassisted, in a complete stranger's barn. Mary wraps her newborn baby in some spare clothes and puts him down for his first nap in a feed trough. And unless Luke forgot to mention something, none of the angels stopped by to wipe out the feed trough or throw Mary a baby shower and present her with color-coordinated onesies, nappies and burping cloths. As far as we know Mary and Jesus's only baby gifts were gold, frankincense and myrrh: the utterly unfitting offerings of the "wise men" -- who may have been wise about many things, but didn't know the first thing about age-appropriate toys for a toddler.

So much for elegance. So much for impressing *anyone*.

Thanks be to God! Thanks be to God that the story of God's coming is not a fairy tale – not animated, not fanciful, not glamorous, not artificial, not sugar-coated or tinsel-covered, and not commercialized or for sale in any way. If some skeptics think that Christianity is just a fairy tale, they should look again – the story Luke tells makes a pretty terrible fairy tale. Fairy tales embody our unrealistic hopes for things we

don't need, but the story of Christ's coming reminds us of what really need, and then tells us that He has come among us.

Wherever we look in this story, we find simple truths, well told.

From the shepherds we learn that Christ came to the lowly to raise them up. He came to those *keeping watch over their flocks at night*: to the attentive and the ready, those awake and watching through the long hours of the night, waiting and hoping to see the glory of the Lord shine all around them.

From Mary we learn that God has looked with favor upon us, and that God's favor is named Jesus. Christ dwells among us with the unimaginable intimacy of the way a mother carries an unborn child. Perhaps that is a metaphor that only mothers can understand. He came to be nearer to us than our own flesh; he came so close that he dwells not only among us, but within us. Who can understand something so beautiful, so profound?

And Joseph – patient, long-suffering, underappreciated Joseph! A man of tremendous imagination and vision who, in the face of scandal and social exclusion, offered a pregnant teenager the protection of marriage.

And the greatest truth of all: this story proclaims *good news of great joy for all people* - yes, for *all* people! - our Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.

These are not the lessons of fairy tales; these are the truths of heaven. From this unfairy tale in Luke we learn that Christ came to dwell among us *as we are*. He is not afraid of our simplicity, our humility, our dirt and untidiness, or our utter unfitness to welcome the Son of God into our world. When we were neither great, nor glamorous, nor powerful, nor rich, nor anyone particularly special, He came to us.

And He comes to us now. On Christmas Eve, heaven and earth seem to come so close, and God – God! - comes to dwell among God's people. Tonight, heaven has come to earth, and God is with us.

Two thousand years ago, God announced his coming to an audience of humble shepherds, then showed up in person in a stable-turned-birthing room, in an unwashed feed trough. And tonight? I wonder where those "thin places" are in our world, the places where we feel heaven coming close enough to touch us. I hope and pray that for you, tonight, this place is a thin place where God comes near to touch and bless you. And I hope that wherever you spend Christmas this year, you have a profound sense that Emmanuel, "God is with us," is with *you*.

Wherever he comes, the message is the same: *Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

Perhaps as a child, you imagined that your favorite story came true and you got to play the starring role. Did that work out for you? Because no matter how hard I imagined, no matter how elaborate a costume I made out of the things I found in my mother's closet or many tubes of her lipstick I smeared on my face, I never actually became a princess. I always woke up the next morning in my own bed and in my own skin, and I still had to go to school the next morning.

This story is different.

Two thousand years ago, God needed a young woman daring enough to say "Let it be done to me according to thy word" (which I think may be one of the most courageous sentences in human history!). God needed a young carpenter willing to take a road trip to Bethlehem at short notice. God needed a band of shepherds to sit in the audience for a performance of one of the greatest musicals of all time. God needed three not-so-wise men to do some shopping for baby gifts.

But that was then. That chapter is closed, but the history continues. This is now. And "now" is *our* turn.

At this moment, the history of God's dwelling with men and women is open to *our* chapter. Right now, this year, in this time, *we* are the history of God with us - - the God who enters our world to touch, save, and heal. Now we are the ones keeping watch, looking for signs of the coming of our Lord. We are the men and women to whom the hosts of heaven are announcing the good news of great joy for all people.

It would be such a shame to admire Mary, Joseph and the shepherds for the roles they played in God's coming to earth, and never find out who we are called to be.

Tonight, I invite you to step deeper into the story. Come a little closer to the Christ child. Tread nearer to the light, drawn on by something you can hardly name. Stay awake and watchful, scanning your life for signs of his coming. Feel the tug of your heart leading you forward, onward, deeper into the mystery. Discover who you were created to be in the story of the God who dwells among his people.

Amen.

Let us pray to be the ones who carry the Christ child into *our* world, to fill the world with light:

God who is present, God who dwells among us:

We ask you to write us into your story.

We ask to be a part of the history of your coming.

In this time, let us be the ones you need. We want to be a part of your arrival.

Fill us with light and send us out into the world carrying the torch of your love.

Amen.