Second Advent: Sunday 07 December 2008
Peace Church, Munich

From Matthew 1:18-25 (Joseph) and Luke 1:26-38 (Mary)

Reality of the Nativity and Advent:
It's not about beautiful pictures, but about listening carefully and saying YES

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be wholly and pleasing unto you, God – our Rock and our Redeemer.

Good morning brothers and sisters. And welcome to Peace Church on this second Sunday in Advent.

Advent is a magical time filled with twinkling lights, special surprises, gifts, sweets and beautiful images. One of my favorite images is the nativity scene, like the one the children created today. You see, ever since I was a child, I have collected nativity scenes – small ones, large ones, in glass, porcelain, wood and stone. I have nativity scenes from the US, South America, Europe and Asia – many I purchased while travelling abroad, many were gifts from friends and family. So what is so special about the nativity? Why do people all over the world display this image?

I did some research and found out that the earliest nativity pictures were found on caskets or sarcophagi from Rome and Southern Gaul. They date back as far as the year 354. That means that the nativity, or crib, manger or crèche, as it is called in different cultures, has a tradition over 1600 years old. But the three-dimensional nativity like the one we created this morning was made popular in the year 1220 by St. Francis of Assisi when he returned from a trip to Egypt. And did you know that these early nativities did not contain Mary, Joseph, the Magi or wise men, camels, cows, sheep, the shepherds, angels or even Baby Jesus? Yes, they forgot the most important part – the Son of God, the reason for the season. So what was included in these early nativity scenes? Usually, just an empty crib, and ox and a donkey. It was beautifully simple – and spoke to a Bible verse familiar to many Christians during Francis of Assisi's life. In Isaiah chapter 1 verse 3, the prophet writes, "The ox knows his owner, and the donkey his master's crib." This became a symbol for much more than the animals – the ox represented the Jewish people, heavily burdened by the law, and the donkey represented the Gentiles or pagans, burdened by their idol-worshipping. Jesus Christ was expected to arrive in the empty manger and free both people from their burdens. The empty manger was a sign of the current situation – all people weighed down with troubles – but the coming of the baby boy, the Son of God – that was a sign of liberation and love. Let us remember what the manger stands for throughout this season – God came to earth for ALL of us – donkey or ox, camel or sheep, man or woman – from any country, from every family, in every time and place.

That is certainly a beautiful image, and one we should carry in our hearts during Advent. But let's take a closer look at the nativity scene. Here you see Mary and Joseph – a happily-married young couple totally in love and at peace with their newborn son. Just like the hymn we sang this morning – away in a manger, no crib for a bed. The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head. But did you notice the second verse – the cattle are lowing, the baby awakes. But little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes? Have you ever thought about that verse? Does that make any sense? I don't have any children, but I have a large family filled with nieces and nephews and I love to babysit them when I am home. But none of them – not one – has ever woken up in the middle of the night startled by some strange sound… and stayed perfectly quiet in their beds. I mean, if Jesus was a normal baby boy, and a cow started moo-ing in his ear and woke him from a deep warm sleep –I bet the first thing he would do would be to cry out. He'd want someone to come over and comfort him, maybe cuddle with him until he could fall back asleep. But that wouldn't make such a nice Christmas song would it? The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes and little Lord Jesus starts crying his head off until Mary feeds and comforts him, or maybe until he breaks down in tears of frustration.

No, a second look at the manger scene definitely tells us that things were probably not as perfect and peaceful as musicians, painters, sculptors and other artists have led us to believe over the past 1600 years. Maybe that's why so many people are lonely and depressed during this season. Maybe we are all trying to make our lives and our families like the perfect and peaceful pictures of the nativity scene or other Christmas classics – films like It's A Wonderful Life or songs like Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire. Maybe rather than feeling disappointed in what we have or let down because the real world, our real lives, are not the stuff of songs and film, maybe we should search for and discover the true meaning of this season. And if we turn to the perfect example – if we look to the birth of Jesus Christ in the Bible – there we find something quite different than the pictures we see in the modern-day nativity. Rather than a happily-married couple excited about their first child, we see Joseph and Mary hurting, filled with fear and doubt. We find a couple on the edge of divorce – before they even make it to the altar.

That brings us to our scripture texts for this morning. Matthew chapter 1 tells us about an angel visiting Joseph to announce the coming of Jesus Christ. In verse 18 Matthew begins by explaining that "when His mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Matthew makes it clear that Mary and Joseph were chosen to be the earthly parents of Jesus, but he also clearly states that they were not yet married. And suddenly Mary turned up pregnant and Joseph knew he was not the father of her child.

What would you do if you thought your fiancé or your partner was cheating on you? Would you stick around to hear an explanation, angelic or otherwise? Although we would all be shocked if found in Joseph's position, it was even more shocking back in New Testament days.

You see, in the first century, engagements were binding premarital contracts. That meant that once a man and woman decided to get engaged, there was a year-long engagement period during which Jewish couples behaved like husband and wife, except that they did not live together or sleep together. As soon as an engagement was entered into, however, it was required by law to end in marriage. Or divorce. That's why Matthew tells us in chapter 1, verse 19 that "Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." Poor Joseph – he falls in love with a beautiful and pious young girl, arranges with her family to be able to marry her, goes through all the necessary steps to seal this binding legal contract of engagement…. and then finds out that she is pregnant!

But what does he do? How does he react? He does not lash out in anger or decide to shame her by bringing her into the public forum. He obviously loves her too much and is devastated by this turn of events. He does not complain to her parents that she is no longer suitable, nor does he accuse her of any misconduct. The Mary he knows could have never done something as terrible as that. But he also knows that as a pious Jew, he cannot marry this "unclean" woman. So he decides to do away with her and with their plan for a future… quietly. I am sure to even make this decision broke his heart – Joseph was in love with Mary and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. But what choice did he have? Imagine the tormented days and nights – Joseph talking to himself, searching for some alternative, some way to work this out so that they could be together, but coming up empty each time. Nightmares of what might have been could have plagued him. One thing is sure – the happy time of their picture-perfect engagement was definitely over. There were no more plans for a future, only plans for a quiet divorce, a quiet end to their love.

But before Joseph could carry out his plan, an angel appeared to him, saying , "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Now THAT'S a dream, isn't it? Can you imagine what happened next – did Joseph wake up screaming, afraid that he was losing his mind? Or did he wake up filled with relief and a sense of peace – finally the terrible predicament made sense! Or perhaps he just continued to sleep and dream – too exhausted to deal with any more thoughts about their situation.

The Bible tells us a few verses later what did happen and we can learn a lot from Joseph's reaction. "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife." Doesn't that sound simple? No ifs, ands or buts. Joseph asks no questions, he requires no explanation or proof of evidence. Joseph awoke, recognized that the angel visitor was no dream but the true voice of God, and obeyed unquestioningly. He did exactly as instructed. He surely did not understand the situation, but he accepted God's plan and his timing. And Joseph DID exactly what God wanted and commanded him to do.

When we think about our own lives during this Advent season, we should ask ourselves – what is God asking of us? What does He want us to do? Sometimes we may feel like Joseph – thrown off guard, unprepared, shocked, confused, maybe even hurt or angry. But we should not be burdened down like the ox and the donkey – we should listen for the angel, for the voice of God, for the coming of wisdom and peace through Jesus Christ. God is faithful – he has plans for each and every one of us here today – plans to prosper us and not to harm us; plans to give us hope and a future. But we must be still enough, even in this very busy season, we must be still enough to hear His voice. And we must be trusting and obedient enough to DO what He asks.

For another example of obedience, we turn to the Gospel reading today from Luke. This story about another angel visiting Mary to announce the birth of the Christ child is just as shocking as Joseph's angel visit. But Mary's response, like Joseph's, is to say YES – she has heard the angel of the Lord speak, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." Mary asks a question first, "How can this be?" But when the angel explains the details and the significance of the child she will bear, Mary clearly answers, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." She doesn't ask, "why me?" or "can this please wait until AFTER I am married?" She doesn't say to the angel, "You know, I am in the middle of a beautiful and special time in my life – I will soon be married. I'd rather focus on my own priorities; get all of my plans accomplished first. But after that, I would be HAPPY to be the mother of the Son of God." No, like Joseph, Mary does not waver or complain – neither of them says, "This isn't fair, we don't deserve this." Both simply accept that what is happening in their lives is the will and movement of God. And both let God lead them through a difficult time – surely they had questions and fears, but their faith was stronger than their doubt.

And by letting God lead, by being obedient to His call, both Mary and Joseph were able to experience many years as the parents of a beautiful baby boy, who grew into an intelligent young man, who grew into the amazing Savior of the World. Had either of them said no, had either of them

said wait; God's plan would still have been accomplished. But God would have found someone else to carry out their roles. And Mary and Joseph would have missed out on living more closely and intimately with the Son of God than probably anyone else on the planet – what an amazing wonder!

You see, though we sometimes cannot see the hand of God in our world today, though violence rages and lives continue to be shattered across the globe, God DOES have a plan for this world. And he is working it out – quietly, slowly, in His time and for His purposes. Either we may listen for our call, be obedient to God's plan, and thereby participate in His wonders. Or we may say no, wait – I am not ready, I am not willing, I do not understand. And then we may miss the opportunity of a lifetime to enjoy great joy and experience amazing wonders.

During this Advent season, take beautiful pictures, like those of the Nativity with you in your hearts. Enjoy the films, the songs, the food – everything! But do not let pictures of what your life should be like make you unhappy or disappointed. Remember that even Baby Jesus cried sometimes, even Mary and Joseph, whose faith was so strong, had feelings of doubt and insecurity. Know that you are not alone, you are not perfect – and God does not need you to be perfect. His love and his grace are not based on what we bring or who we are. These most precious gifts are waiting for all of us. Focus on the joy in your life, the movement of God, and listen closely for His call. When you hear it, say YES, be willing to be used, DO something. He is waiting and ready to bless each and every one us more.
Amen.

Let us pray,

Father, in this time of waiting and watching, in this special and miraculous season of Advent, let us find quiet moments, let us find peace, if only for an instant. And in the quiet of a still small moment, let us be receptive and willing to hear and to answer your call. Fill us with hope, fill us with faith, fill us with love. And let us shine that love on all of those around us during this season. May our light be brighter than any Christmas tree or candle – may the light of our love brighten this world, so desperately in need of your message of hope and peace through the coming of the Prince of Peace.
In his name we pray, AMEN.