

Christmas Eve Sermon

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: Luke 2:1-15

December 24, 2011

We know this story well, don't we? Mary, Joseph, the decree from Caesar that sent them to Bethlehem to be enrolled. The inn and the stable. No room in the inn, but a place in the barn that the innkeeper could make available. The manger, (a feeding trough, really) could serve as a crib in which to put the new-born child.

God come to earth in this child's birth in the most humble of places: a barn in a village few beyond it had ever heard of. Darkness illuminated by candlelight, or was it the star, or the light of God shining round this child and his holy family? How is it, we ask, that God should choose to enter human history in this unusual way?

And then the news of the birth begins to spread: angels shout their glorious song and shepherds, among others, respond with glee. This is what they have been waiting for. This is what they have been hoping for. This is what they have been praying for: God with us. God making a home in our home, no matter how humble. And

the angel's assurance that we shall never forget: *be not afraid*. This news we bring is cause for great joy. A savior is born to you, this night, in Bethlehem.

As we hear this story once more we are in familiar territory. We know these words by heart. We have told them to our children and grandchildren. We find them comforting words, dramatic words giving us assurance of God's presence among us just as they did for the shepherds. We have heard the angel's song. We are not afraid.

We are, however, struck by how remarkably detailed and real to the touch is Luke's familiar story. The *darkness*, the *barn*, the *soft light*, the *child*, the *manger*, the *witnesses*, the *ecstatic shepherds*, the awesome spectacle of *God incarnate*. We wonder, why the humble setting? Why a little town in the middle of nowhere? And what about the barn and the manger? We wonder, as we wander, out under the sky: What did God have in mind here? What is God telling us that we need to hear if we are to be well-informed? What further clues are there here to suggest what God is up to in choosing this humble place for Jesus' birth?

There is a more contemporary barn setting where another remarkable transformation occurs which may be instructive as we appreciate, once again, what God was about in that Bethlehem barn long ago and far away. I'm thinking of the miracle of grace described in E.B. White's children's classic, *Charlotte's Web*. Once again, the setting is a barn near a small town where a young girl's life is changed through her encounters with a few of God's most humble creatures: a spider, a rat and a pig. It is a touching story of life and death, joyful discovery and painful disappointment. The

barn setting is, again, a place of new creation and growth as well as the place where all are regularly fed by those who love them most. Somehow White's story would not have been the same had it been set in the midst of a metropolis. What could be less threatening or more engaging than animals that speak to one another, declaring their loyalty and care to one another? We are captured by the reality, the peace and the possibilities represented in their barnyard home.

II

This night, as we recall the setting of Jesus' birth in a lowly stable, we are impressed once again by the attention to concrete and specific things that take on a symbolic value. We find this surprising. Who would have thought that a barn would be home to the one who transforms the lives of others? And here is a feeding trough, a manger, which is used to comfort the one who has been appointed by God to feed us into eternity. That is what this Supper at this table here tonight is all about.

The humble rural setting of Bethlehem may well have been God's way of finding a quiet place for a grand announcement. If the setting had been a city we probably would have found a way to interpret that to our understanding as well. You know, God the contemporary deity who comes among us in an urban environment just to show us this new Word is for a new world, that sort of thing.

But God did not choose the city for the incarnation event. God chose a humble barn for this expression of incredible love for the world. The barn would have been a peaceful place that night, most likely. A few sleeping animals as the story is told, a clear sky, cool weather for that time of year. A setting in the little inn would have

been uncomplicated and unimpressive enough but the choice of the barn for the birth is brilliant: *God with us amid hay and dung and darkness and lowing of animals. It is a peaceful setting and if we hear nothing else tonight let us hear that this is a story to tell the world that peace is at hand.*

The world was and still is a violent place to live. Enemies were and are abundant. Confusion in the political realm was and is common. Rulers were more inclined to think of themselves first rather than their constituents. To find just one leader who was truthful was a challenge. And into this chaotic world comes a savior, who is Christ the new King and Lord of life. Into a world of selfish, self-serving, greedy and ungrateful people comes an expression of sacrifice, care, gracious care and thankfulness the likes of which the world had never seen. Many heard this news and were transformed. But, like today, many did not hear, would not hear, refused to believe and remained as they were.

I am inclined to think that if we want to know God's ways and God's possibilities look to the Christ. If we prefer to keep on doing things our way, whether educated sophisticate or dirt poor commoner then this is certainly a story we will continue to question if not ignore. But if we yearn for peace, God's peace, in the midst of a world in turmoil that does not know the way to finding its own kind of peace, then this is a story for you. This is your sprig of hope. This is your connection to living your life with God. It begins with this child, this night, this barn, this feeding trough, this unparalleled love that leads to lasting peace.

Thanks be to God. Peace on earth is possible for all.