

Our Christmas Story

One of the things of which I have become more and more aware of is that Christmas happens amidst the ordinary circumstances of life. Think about that first Christmas: an emperor issuing decrees and taxing people, a couple that is unmarried and pregnant, a no vacancy sign, and field hands working the night shift. Those are real life circumstances and real life is always the world of Christmas. It was then and it is today.

For some people that means Christmas is a hard time of year. It's difficult and painful. For others it's the best time of year. It's joyful and exciting. For most of us, I suspect, it varies from year to year.

Take a moment and think back over the past year. How has your life changed since last Christmas? In what ways is your world today different from then? Has it been a difficult and painful year, or has it been a year of joy and thanksgiving? Was it a memorable year or one you would like to forget? Maybe it was a mixture of all the above.

Regardless of what the last year has been for us and whether we consider the changes it brought to be for better or for worse, it is deeply rooted in the Christmas story.

I am not talking about the then and there Christmas story, the one that starts out "In those days" and takes place "in that region." I am talking about the here and now Christmas story, the one that is taking place in these days and in this community. That is really the Christmas story that matters to us today.

What good is it to us if Jesus is laid in a manger in Bethlehem if he is not also cradled in the manger of our heart?

What good is it to us if the angel announces good news of great joy to the shepherds living in the fields if that good news is not also announced in the night fields of our lives?

What good is it to us if the shepherds go to see this thing that has taken place if we do not also see in our lives this thing that has happened?

What good is it to us if Mary ponders and treasures how these things can be if we do not also wonder at the mystery of God with us in our time and place?

We have come to this night to hear the Christmas story. The story never changes. We count on that. Every year it's the same story with the same characters, the same locations, the same plot, and the same ending.

Mary and Joseph are pregnant and unmarried.

Emperor Augustus issues a decree of taxation.

Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem.

There's no room at the inn.

Mary gives birth to Jesus and places him in a manger.

The angel announces this good news to the shepherds. They come and see this amazing thing that has happened. Mary treasures and ponders the words of the shepherds, and they return to their fields.

You know that story as well as I do. You've probably heard it and told it multiple times. But have you ever considered the poetry of Christmas?

I'm talking about the images and metaphors that tell the story behind the story. The facts of Christmas remain the same every year, but the poetry of Christmas is what keeps the story alive, has preserved it through the ages, and allows us to relive it again every year for the first time.

I think that's the real reason we came together tonight. We come for the poetry. We want to know that despite our changing story and despite what has happened over the past year, Christmas is still true and still happening.

We want to be reminded that light is still shining in the darkness, that good news is still being announced, that the child is still being born anew, and that God is still with us.

Yes, it is still true. All of it. Christmas is happening in whatever the circumstances of your life might be this night. Christmas is happening in

whatever changes you've experienced over the last year. Christmas is as real and present in the difficult and painful times of life as it is in the joyful and exciting times.

I don't know how that happens. I only know that it does happen. I've experienced it in my life, and I've seen it happen in the lives of others. I cannot tell you how it happens, but I can tell you this. It's about the poetry. Let me give you some examples.

Have you ever loved so deeply that your heart ached? And all you wanted to do was pour yourself into the life of another?

Who are the people, the Josephs, that have accompanied, protected, and cared for you through this life?

Have you ever looked in the face of a newborn child and marveled at the miracle of life? Been inspired to be a better person? Wished for that kind of gentleness and innocence in your life and world?

Have you ever had someone show up in your life and say or do exactly what you needed? They came and announced to you good news when you needed it most.

Think of a time that was so perfect, so beautiful, so profound that you were speechless and all you could do was treasure and ponder the moment.

Have you ever woken up to the beauty and possibilities of a new day after living through a night of darkness?

Recall a time when hope, strength, and courage were born anew in you.

Have you ever experienced peace and contentment in circumstances that were neither peaceful nor what you wanted?

When was the last time you danced with joy to the music of laughter and a chorus of smiles?

Have you ever done what seemed to you impossible or gotten through a hard time and not known how you did that? In fact, you didn't think you could or would.

What are you cradling and cherishing in your heart tonight that you know beyond a doubt is a gift from God?

That's all poetry. Those and a thousand other verses like them are the poetry of Christmas. And it is so much more than the facts of Christmas. The facts of Christmas are just the starting point.

Every year the verses of Christmas poetry are written anew using the circumstances of our lives. The reality of Christmas, God with us, is always happening. That's never in question.

So, take a minute and tell yourself the story of Christmas once again but this time listen for the poetry.

My prayer tonight for each one of you is that Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God would come alive inside of you. That the Spirit of Christmas that we're talking about would come alive inside of you.

I pray that Jesus' divinity will come into this world through you and that you would be transformed into the likeness and image of the Lord Jesus Christ and that you will live a life glorifying God; pushing back against the darkness, pushing back against the despair and the depravity of this world, and that your life would be a beacon of hope. What a holy night it is tonight, that Jesus Christ has made his entrance into this world.

I pray that the angels would rejoice again tonight and sing "Hallelujah".

Amen