

Don't you love Christmas Eve? I do. It's probably my favorite night of the year. Practically all year long I look forward to coming to this familiar place to see all of you coming here to join us and light a candle with us on this blessed night. I look out over those who have come here tonight and I sense that this time is special for you as well. For many of us, it's the first real moment of **rest** we've had in about a month! But now, we **come** with family, and as God's family, and we settle back in the pews and **rest**. You can almost hear a collective sigh. A calm quiet peacefulness; that's what it feels like, isn't it? The rush is over. Just quiet: *“Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright...”*

The images we treasure in our hearts, images of a poor young couple and a new born baby boy; shepherds watching their flocks out in the fields. Sometimes I just want to breathe in the blessed peace that comes to us on this holy night.

But there is also **rejoicing** to do. An angel of the Lord came to the shepherds: *But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”* (Luke 2:10-12). And the huge, ginormous heavenly host of angels sang: *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests”* (Luke 2:14).

A peaceful, quiet night is shattered by the most incredible news of all time. Our lives and the lives of all people living in all times and places will never be the same. This proclamation is the fulfillment of the most amazing prophecy of Isaiah. He said: *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this”* (Isaiah 9:6-7).

We should be astounded. We should be ecstatic. I know I was ecstatic when each one of my 3 grandchildren were born! **A son is given!** Tonight we celebrate the most wonderful night since time began. God has come—come down from highest heaven and has taken on human form to be among us. God is no longer some distant, celestial deity who judges us from afar. He is EMMANUEL. That's not just a name! That's a fulfillment of prophecy. EMMANUEL!! GOD WITH US! God is with us—now and forever!

What God set in motion on that first Christmas over 2,000 years ago can never be stopped—the everlasting salvation of all creation, and it cannot be stopped by any power in creation. That's the good news that I want you to hold in your heads and your hearts tonight. That's the good news I want you to take with you when you leave this place. That which begins tonight in a stable in Bethlehem will not be fully accomplished until this child is hung on a cross outside the city of Jerusalem. You must keep that in your hearts as well. Because that's the real wonder. It's nearly impossible to fathom.

It's absolutely awesome and amazing. It's the wonder of what happens in Bethlehem and it's the wonder of what happens later in Jerusalem. It's the wonder of God coming to us—not us going to God, but God coming to us—in the most unexpected of ways. God **comes** to us as a baby born in a stable and laid in a manger—because there was no room for him anyplace else. There was no room for him, friends!

We talk about it every Christmas. We picture it on Christmas Cards. We sing about it in Christmas Carols. But do we really acknowledge it? There was no room for him, so his mother—his young, teen-aged, unwed mother—gave birth to him in a stable, and his crib was a box full of hay from which some animal in the stable ate its meals. Imagine the surprise that cow or sheep or donkey must have experienced when it went to the manger to have its next meal. It wanders over to eat and finds a baby lying on its food. Imagine how stunned that poor, hungry animal must have been.

At Christmas we should be just as stunned, but we're not. We know the story. We know all about the census and the crowded town of Bethlehem and the stable and the shepherds and the angels. We take it all in stride. But we should be astonished. This is not how kings are *supposed to come into the world*. Kings are supposed to be born in palaces surrounded by adoring subjects who celebrate the birth of an heir to the throne. But the King of all creation comes into the world surrounded by farm animals. Why are we NOT surprised?

You know what surprises me? I'm continually surprised that some people don't understand what Christmas is about. Having said that, I'll bet many of you might expect me to give a diatribe about the commercialism of the Christmas season. Well, I'm not. The commercialism of Christmas is not my main concern. In fact, if God wanted to, God could *use* the commercialism of Christmas to spread the good news of Jesus. If God can use a stable, then what makes us think that God couldn't use a Walmart or a Macy's or a Kohls?

What I really don't want any of you to miss are the four words of tonight's sermon. We have heard them in Advent over the last four Sundays from Isaiah: "Come—Rest—Rejoice—Give." Jesus has **come** because God **gives** us his Son. We may think that *our* coming to church tonight or *our* giving gifts to others is what's most important. But no, not really.

To be honest, the beautiful story about something that took place 2,000 years ago that we call Christmas must have very little relevance to us today, right? Or are we missing the meaning of Jesus' **coming** and of God's **giving**? How can we appreciate the angels appearing in the sky, announcing the birth of a baby in a stable? How can we appreciate Mary's baby in the manger? I'll tell you how. By **resting** and **rejoicing**. That's how. God does something and we do something. God has done the **coming** and the **giving**; now it's up to us to do the **resting** in his perfect peace and the **rejoicing**. Isn't that unbelievably good news? That's the gospel. We probably can't appreciate what God has done for us, or comprehend everything about the story, because God has done what we least expected. It's not mainly about angels. And it's not mainly about shepherds. The main event is a tiny baby laid in a manger. Christmas is about God pulling off the biggest surprise in all of history.

Could God have sent his Son to be born in a palace? No problem. Could God have chosen a princess to be the mother of the king of all creation? No sweat. But God didn't choose to work that way. God chose to

come to us in poverty, in simplicity, in humility and in helplessness. And here's another surprise for you. God **continues to come** to us in the abject **poverty** that so many in this world live every day. God **continues to come** in the **simplicity** of a Salvation Army worker standing outside a store ringing a bell. God **continues to come** in the **humility** of a homeless person sleeping on a piece of cardboard in the bitter cold. And God **continues to come** in the **helplessness** of a hungry child crying in the night. That's what Christmas is about—about God coming to us in the most unexpected and most surprising ways.

But why didn't God just **come** in majesty and power for all to see? Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph because God knew that in order to save us from our sin, Jesus had to know what it was like to be one of us. That's the most wonderful part of Christmas. Jesus claims us by becoming one of us. Jesus knows what we feel, how we hurt and what we fear. He knows our personal insecurity, our physical pain and our emotional suffering. But he also knows our joy, our healing and our laughter. He knows these things because he lived these things. Christmas is: Jesus **coming** to us not only as a divine being, but as one of us. God **giving** us all that he could possibly give.

If you were here last year on Christmas Eve and this story sounds vaguely familiar to you, there's a good reason for that. It's the very same story you heard last year. It's a different sermon than last year, but it's the same story—the original story, the authentic report, the astounding good news that God has come to earth in a baby born in Bethlehem.

This story began centuries before the birth in Bethlehem—really eons before. You will hear this same story repeated every Christmas because it is necessary for all of us doubting and struggling pilgrims on the journey of faith to hear it. Paul tells the Nativity story in only one verse in Galatians 4:4: "*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son.*" Jesus **came**. We people of faith must never get too far removed from the centrality of this story at Christmas. Retelling the story of Jesus Christ, and his Incarnation, is fundamental to what it means to be a follower of Christ.

No other religion has a message like the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

God the Son, took on human form—fully God and fully man. Because Jesus is God, we can trust him, obey him, and worship him. Because Jesus is human, subject to pain, hunger, sorrow, injustice, suffering, and even death, his life becomes a tremendous resource for us in the midst of our own pain, hunger, sorrow, injustice, suffering and death.

The Christmas message reminds us that our faith is not based on what *we do*, but on *what God has already done* by **coming** to us and **giving** us his Son.

At Christmas the Savior of all, the promised Messiah, is born anew in us.

Our body is the stable and our heart is the manger.

May Christ be born in each of you this Christmas... Amen.