

Luke 2:1-20 Christmas Eve- 2009

“A Simple Wonder in Simple Words” (based on sermon by Rev. Elliott Hull).

We have all come to hear once again the “old, old story” of the star in the east, the shepherds in the field, the song of the angels and the babe in the manger. I am indebted to my pastor friend, Elliott Hull, for his help in telling this “greatest story ever told”.

Christmas is the beginning of the story of the earth’s redemption. It is the story of God’s divine love. It is the story of the rescue mission in which God sets us free from sin and death. It is the story of Jesus. It is the greatest story ever told and we long to hear it again and again.

The story begins with an angel who announced the Birth of Jesus to the shepherds in the fields surrounding Bethlehem. It was the first Christmas sermon ever given. It was a sermon of very few words. But those words were powerful and they changed the world. The angel said to the shepherds, “**Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For to you is born this day, in the city of David, a savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.**”

This very first Christmas sermon was a marvel of simplicity. In these simple words, everything that needed to be said was said. “**Do not be afraid.**” We do not need to fear God. “**For to you is born this day, a Savior.**” God has come for you, in person. This is “**good news and it causes great joy!**” For the child born in a manger is none other than “**Christ, the Lord**” of heaven and earth.

In the centuries that have followed since the night our Lord was born, this simple sermon by the angel has grown to endless volumes of comment from the pens of scholars and lips of preachers around the world. The glory of the heavens that flooded the Judean skies that holy night has become a festival of light that now encircles the globe. The

simple worship of the shepherds in the presence of lambs and donkeys within a lowly stable has become a glorious ritual, celebrated in beautiful cathedrals. The swaddling clothes and manger lit by a dim light have blossomed into priestly robes and marble altars with candlelit processions for thousands of worshipers. And the sweet simplicity of the Christmas message can easily be lost along the way.

But listen closely to the angel: **“And this will be a sign for you: you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”**

That’s where we will find him. Not within the royal splendor of Jerusalem, but in the lowly poverty of Bethlehem.

Not in the palace of the king, but in a small Judean stable.

Not in the incense-perfumed presence of the high priest, but in the company of smelly shepherds and the dense aroma of a barn.

Christmas is a simple wonder, and its message comes to us in simple words. That’s what makes it wonder-filled, because it is so simple. It is simple in its message, simple in its circumstances, simple in its characters, simple in its faith. It is simply full of wonder – or- wonder-full. And I suggest that when we lose the wonder of this Holy Night, we lose it because we are looking for it in the wrong places.

We look in the wrong places when we seek its wonder in the decorations and pageantry, parties and planning, gift buying and gift giving: the complicated and exhausting side of Christmas. We forget the simple manger and swaddling clothes. But if we want a Christmas that is simply wonder-filled we are called to return to the manger. When we do, we find the Christ Child there, in the simplicity of the manger, and our Christmas lights glow just a little brighter and the Christmas music has a beauty we hear nowhere else and the Christmas story has deeper meaning for us.

We dare not forget the glory of this Holy Night either, for Christmas is

full of wonder and glory. When St. Luke recorded the event, he did not identify the baby Jesus as “**God from God, light from light, true God from true God.**” Luke tells the simple story of a humble birth in humble circumstances to humble parents. “**In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled.... And Joseph, too, went up... to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.**”

That’s how it happened. A child was born. But this was a different birth and there was glory too. Suddenly, star-light formed around the humble setting. Shepherds tending their flocks in midnight darkness were suddenly bathed in light. The voice of an angel broke the stillness with his simple sermon and the heavens echoed with the song of the heavenly chorus. And in a distant eastern sky, a company of Wise Men saw the star and began their pilgrimage to Bethlehem to seek the new-born King.

This king is the Christ Child, Emmanuel, God with us, our Lord, our Savior. The infant weak and helpless is known to us as “**Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**” The fullness of time had come. And, “**The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.**”

This is the most glorious revelation of all, that the infant Jesus, lying in a manger, born of Mary, came for you and Christmas becomes once again, simply wonder-full.

Thanks be to God. Amen.