

Year B, Christmas Eve  
Isaiah 9:2-7  
Psalm 96  
Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-20

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Rutherfordton, NC  
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I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. *Amen.*

Have you ever known someone who tells the same story over and over and over again? The first time you hear it, it's interesting. It keeps your attention. You might even think about it later, remembering the particular details that fascinated you or drew you in. The second time you hear it, you may manage to listen politely and attentively, minding only a little bit that you've already heard it. If you listen closely, you might pick up on a few details you missed the first time around. When it comes up the third time—or the fourth, or sixth, or eighth time—you may *try* to listen but all of a sudden you realize you've zoned out and haven't heard a word that was said. And that's a shame, because even though we may think we've heard it all, there is something new to be discovered each time we hear a story, something to open our thoughts or our perspectives—maybe even to open our hearts.

That's the case with Luke's story of the birth of baby Jesus. How many times have you heard it in your lifetime? How many times have you told it? Our precious children, from the youngest to the oldest, are pretty good at telling it, and I hope you'll encourage them to tell it to you sometime in the next couple of days, or maybe in the middle of next summer. I suspect you'll hear something you haven't heard before, a detail you may have missed, a perspective you haven't considered.

Tonight is a magical night, holy and precious to us, whether we're children or adults. Many of us will be spending time with family and friends, each of us playing a unique role in our celebration of this sacred event, in the traditions that have become precious and necessary to us if we're going to do Christmas "right." We can so easily get caught up in these traditions and practices that we don't really pay attention to what it is that makes them special, or why we do them in the first place. We cannot let that happen! So tonight I invite you to open not only your hearts, but also your imaginations; to wonder about those people who were part of the holiest night that ever was, and to consider what you would have done, how you would have felt if you had been in their position.

First there is Mary: young, inexperienced, tired, giving birth to her first child, and very likely afraid but also excited. She was going to be a mother! And not only a mother, but the mother of God. Her experience is so different from ours, not only because none of us have had our children in a stable or as far as I know have given birth to the Son of God, but also because she was, for all practical purposes, alone. Her family was far, far away. There were no grandmothers there to comfort her or to give her advice. Joseph was there, of course; but sometimes a woman needs the presence of another woman. How would Mary have gotten through this without her faith, without her belief in God's promises delivered to her through the angel Gabriel? In spite of all the difficulties that surrounded her son's birth, Mary had no doubt that it would be as the angel said.

Joseph may not have been as sure. Would you have been? He was probably afraid, too. Excited? It's hard to know, but he may have felt more anxious than excited. This was a new experience for him as well, and the circumstances were far from normal. This was not how he had imagined his life with Mary would begin. And all this business about Mary and the holy baby she would bear. It wasn't even his baby! He'd had a little time to get used to the whole thing, but still, he had no experience to prepare him for this. Nothing had been easy—not the months since Gabriel came to him in a dream, and not the slow and tedious trip to Bethlehem with a very pregnant woman. And there was no place for them to stay at the time when they needed it most. It wasn't his fault that there weren't any rooms available, but it still made him feel a bit incompetent. And he was tired, too. Exhausted probably. He wasn't sure how he had been able to stay calm as one innkeeper after another told him there was no room for his family.

And those innkeepers! They must have been overwhelmed by the number of people who had come to town to be counted. Their inns were filled to capacity. The holy family was not the first they had turned away. After the long trip to Bethlehem *all* of the travelers were tired and demanding. Tempers were short and not everyone was as polite as Joseph had been when he learned there was no place for his pregnant wife to have her baby. It had been hard for every one of them to turn this family away, but what could they do? They couldn't put someone else on the street to make room for these latecomers. As the day wore on, each of the innkeepers was also growing tired, frustrated and impatient—just like those they were trying to accommodate. I wonder if any of them considered opening their own homes to the plight of this young couple? Surely it was God's Spirit who reminded the last one that there was an empty stall in the stable. And surely the poverty and simplicity of our Savior's birth was part of God's plan for this child to bring love and hope to everyone, regardless of their station in life.

And that's where the shepherds come in. They were the lowliest of the low in that culture of rich and poor, of honor and shame. They weren't rich, and they certainly had no honor. Nomads in the true sense of the word, they left their families for weeks on end, even months at a time, and that was only one reason people didn't regard them highly. There was also their smell, the smell that came from living outdoors among the animals they watched. They knew what others thought of them. How could they be worthy enough to visit a newborn king? Besides, leaving their flocks alone was risky. Those sheep were their livelihood. But they had no choice, not really. The angel had terrified them, but the heavenly host compelled them to go. "Peace on earth among those whom he favors." Were they favored? They had to go to Bethlehem to find out.

What an interesting combination of people, drawn together to give honor and glory to an infant who had no place to lay his head except a food trough in a cow's stall. And here we are together this evening, another interesting combination of people, drawn together to give honor and glory to the newborn king, just as people have been doing for centuries upon centuries. Each of us brings our own human issues, our fears and faith, our anxiety and our anger, our unworthiness and our desire to be worthy. We gather on this evening because we've been told that to us this child is born. This precious baby became to the Wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace foretold thousands of years ago by the Prophet Isaiah. God came to earth to bring us the hope that we'll find in no other.

So tonight we join the multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." *Amen and amen.*