
Love Born in a Stable

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 24 December 2023 evening

Isaiah 9:2-7 • Titus 2:11-14 • Luke 2:1-20



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

It is Christmas Eve and the familiar stories are being told. Mary and Joseph make their way to Bethlehem, in order to be counted in the census. When they arrive, she is near her time of delivery, but they can only find room in a stable; the inns are too crowded with other travellers. So she gives birth to her firstborn son and wraps him up in what cloths she has, and lays him in the manger, the animals' feed trough, on a bed of hay.

A little ways away several shepherds see an amazing sight: a glorious light in the sky, and angels singing, praising God and telling of the birth of the Messiah. "Come and see," the angels are saying. "Come and see the birth of the one who will be King!" And the shepherds do make their way to Bethlehem, to see this thing that has happened.

It seems remarkable that only Mary and Joseph and a few shepherds know about this astonishing happening. God, who is so great that our poor imaginations struggle to comprehend him, has come to earth in the form of a little baby. It is the most amazing thing. God has entered his own creation, made himself small and vulnerable, in order to help us and show us the way to everlasting life. And he has chosen to do it in a little town, far away from the big cities and the great civilisations of the day. And he has chosen to do it through an unknown woman in a small village on the edge of the desert.

But the invitation comes to us: come and see. That is how God works. For all his power and might, God never forces us to come to him. He does not reach down and pull us into his love and care. God's invitation is a gentle one. Through the millennia, those who have sought God have found God; those who did not seek him have not found him.

This is not to say that God does not try to encourage us. He spoke through the ancient prophets — Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel — who all told us of the love our Creator holds for us. Some people listened and turned toward God, but many, many did not. So God came down to earth, and through his Son, again offered us the chance of eternal life and love. Still, his message is one of “come and see,” not a forcing or a command, but an invitation.

This is not well understood by many in this world. Many who do not believe in God say, “If there is a God, why does he not show himself clearly, and prove his existence to everyone, so there is no doubt? Why do we have to have faith?” It is a bit of a mystery. It would seem so much easier for everyone if God just appeared to all and said, “Here I am! Now you can no longer doubt me.” This idea of God-on-demand fits in well with our instant-gratification society, but actually, we have to turn toward God if we are to meet him. For God is love, and God wants our love. We were created in love, and our Creator desires us to return that love. And you can't force love. We are enough like God (after all, we were created in God's image) that we can use ourselves as an analogy. Love cannot be forced. If someone says to me, “I've done all these things for you: now — love me!” I am not likely to respond favourably. Love cannot be forced. God wants our love, but wants each of us to approach him in openness.

At the heart of faith is a leap into the unknown. You cannot make that leap with a closed mind; you must be open to what you may find. The psalm says, “Taste and see,” for it is like trying a new food. If you decide beforehand that you're not going to like it, like a little kid with a strange vegetable on his plate, then you're not going to like it. But if you approach it with an open mind, if you give it a chance, you may find a wonderful new experience. Faith is like that. It is on our own initiative that we come to God. We must make the

choice. Until we do, the way will be closed to us, and we will not even know what we are missing. We cannot know God until we try to know God.

So God came into the world on that long-ago Christmas Day not with a bang, but in a gentle way, through an act of love, the love of a mother for her baby. And in the same way, the Gospel of Christ spread out into the world, not through force, but through gentle teaching and acts of charity. Of course, there have been times in history when misguided Christians tried to spread the word through force — and may God forgive them for their sins. God's own way is to invite, not compel; to ask in love, not to demand.

This Christmas, seek God in your heart and know that he is there. Come and see the child in the stable, the baby who is Lord of us all, cradled in the arms of his loving mother. And share that love with those you hold in your hearts.