

Eve of the Nativity December 24, 2018 St. Christopher's

My sisters and brothers in Christ,

We are here once again, on this evening, to commemorate, to celebrate the birth of our saviour Jesus Christ. Tomorrow is the date that the historic church, in the 4th century, determined should be recognized as his Nativity. It is not his actual birthday – no one knows when that was.

The Nativity story in Luke's Gospel: with many details that have become enshrined in our minds about *what* happened, *how* it happened. A brief reference with few details is in Matthew's Gospel. And nothing at all in Mark and John. So we return to Luke each year to hear the story and to listen to the shepherds in Luke's Gospel: "Let us go now to Bethlehem...." And so the shepherds become part of this glorious event. They see the infant Messiah. They go out and make known what the angels told them – and what they have seen with their own eyes. They glorify and praise God. These shepherds were the first human heralds of the birth. And they speak to us this evening. These nameless shepherds, unclean by Hebrew religious law, these ordinary people, were chosen by God to be the first to know about this birth.

You can think of Luke's Gospel and the other Gospels as sacred word paintings. As such, they are not susceptible to the same standards as journalistic accounts, which did not exist in those days. They are descriptive art, they are impressions of what happened. They are renderings, not replicas. This does not mean they are not useful or accurate. Art has the great advantage of helping us to see and feel things that we might otherwise miss.

In Luke's account of the Nativity we find many details of what happened, and how it happened. We have drawn our own stories and popular culture from these details: greeting cards, books, movies, songs. But in a way, these details distract us from the real story, the real meaning, of *why* Christ was sent to us, *why* he came to live among us as one of us. The details in Luke's Nativity account do not ask us for a commitment, they do not ask us to pledge our selves to a way of life. But...to search for and find the answer to *why* calls us to follow a mandate, calls us to follow The Way. Discovering the *why* demands a profession of faith. It is what we are as Christians.

I ask myself: how do I address this challenge, the challenge of *why*? I discover that I must look beyond the details of the Nativity event itself. Remember how the angel Gabriel described the unborn to Mary: "he will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary was perplexed, but responded as a faithful servant of the Lord: "Let it be with me according to your word." She entered the mystery of God and dedicated herself. She understood the *why* of the birth.

And look at John the Baptizer, coming out of the wilderness to prepare the way for Jesus. He tells us *why* Christ came among us: Salvation is coming from God. John tells the people: repent from your sins, renounce sin and begin a new life. One who is mightier than I is coming among us. What should we do? John gave an answer. He instructed the crowds to

share their food, their clothes, what they had, with the have-nots. He demanded honest dealings from the tax collectors. He told the soldiers to stop extorting money from the people. Repent. Sin no more. The Son of God is coming. Salvation is at hand.

Look at the scriptural record of the life of Jesus. As a young man, he read scripture in the synagogue, from the prophet Isaiah: good news for the poor, release of the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, the end of oppression. And later Jesus gave us the Beatitudes and told us who the blessed are: the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for their righteousness.

Jesus continually described and commended the sacred life in opposition to the secular life – he commended a life of compassion. That is, you can be in the world, but not of the world. Don't give alms in public and look for public praise, he said – give in secret and receive the blessing of God that is of infinite value. He commended to his disciples, not the rich, but the poor widow in the Temple who gave her last tiny coin. He challenged hypocrisy, and he threw out the moneychangers from the Temple for their desecration of the house of God and their dishonest dealings.

Jesus, the healer of the sick, the one who offered salvation for the faithful. With kindness he made room for sinners who repented and pledged to lead a new life. He was with those who remain faithful to God in the face of great challenges, faithful in prayer and in manner of living.

The real story of the Nativity is not the star in the sky, not the baby Jesus in the feed bin, nor the shepherds, the angels, and later the wise men. None of that is important, even if it is the Christmas card picture. The real story of the Nativity is not something Charles Dickens wrote, either.

The real story, the almost forgotten story, is that Mary acted through her faith *and* her devotion to God. And Jesus came to live among *us*, not necessarily to make our life easy, but to show us The Way, and to save us – to offer us a pattern of life leading to salvation – to show us what to do because it is morally correct and sacredly right.

That is what the Nativity is all about. It is not the who or the how or the where. It is the *why*. *Why* God sent his son to live as one of us, and to suffer death. That is the importance of the Nativity. We are baptized, we live and worship as Christians because of *why* he was born—not because of the circumstances of his birth.

And I ponder this, especially at this time of year. At this holy moment, I ponder this with you. Ah, yes, of course, I say. That's right. I remember all that now. Thank you for this gift. Thank you for reminding me of *why*. ❀