

[Opening Slide]

Seeing Jesus in the Nativity

"And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." (Luke 2:6-7)

The Gospels of Luke and Matthew set the stage for one of the most iconic of scenes of all time. Year after year, we behold this scene, on postage stamps, Christmas cards, with ceramic figurines on the mantle, wooden carvings on a coffee table, plastic statues in the yard, children's Christmas programs, or even in living color. Now, while more than likely all the characters of the Christmas story were not all together on the first Christmas, the Nativity gives us a panoramic view – all in one place – of God's stepping into time. Those who are visual learners will most certainly rejoice!

But have you ever stopped to think that each character not only has their own story, but one that intimately connects to *His* story – connects to *Jesus*? For instance ...

[Slide # 2] 1. The Magi: Jesus Made a Long Journey, Bringing Precious Gifts

Where, while it's been estimated that these travelers may have traveled 100's of miles to get to Bethlehem, truth be told, their journey pales in comparison to Jesus's own journey to bring forth God's gift of love. It's something of which John speaks when the apostle profoundly observes:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling [tent] among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

Talk about a profound thought! Where these powerful lines explain that Jesus was with the heavenly Father when the earth was created; and where the Son's journey to "*become flesh*" intentionally left that glory, took on flesh and bone, being born in our likeness. A gift of God, to bring us a gift:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

The gift God gives was, in fact, Himself! So that, when we look at the Magi, and their treasures, we see in them the journey that Jesus made, and the gift He brought to us – salvation in His name!

Then, there are ...

[Slide # 3] 2. The Shepherds: Jesus Proclaims the Good News for Everyone

Though we will touch on these heralds more in depth in our Christmas Eve services, what we behold in them is nothing short of what God call *us* to as His disciples: that is, joyfully to bear witness to the grace we have all received. Where, the angels have just declared to them:

"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people!" (Luke 2:10)

Whereupon they journey to the stable, to behold *"the word concerning what had been told them about this child."* (Luke 2:10, 15) Beholding the gift of a Good Shepherd – the very embodiment of the Good News He has come to share. Where, more than once, Jesus proclaims:

"I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." (Luke 4:43)

Yes, what is it that the shepherds experienced firsthand? Nothing short of the forgiveness of their sins!

[OPTIONAL: Where, perhaps I've related the story of how I almost didn't make it out of seminary ... *[relate the story]*... "Because they were sinners!"

Yes, we are. As were the shepherds, the Magi, Joseph and Mary.] But into our darkness and sin, into our falling far short of God's glory, Jesus the Savior comes. *"I must proclaim the good news!"* That is why Jesus made the journey. *You* are why He made the journey, as He came not to ply us with more rules and then to judge us when we break them. No! He came as a gift, embodying the very Good News He would ultimately bleed and die to sign and seal: that God loves them! God loves *you*!

Then, there's ...

[Slide # 4] 3. Joseph (whom we met last week): Jesus Demonstrates Mercy over the Law

Who stands as a bastion of faith within the Christmas Gospel. Of whom, curiously, the gospels don't tell us anything else about him past the 2nd chapter of Luke. However, what we see in Joseph is a portrait of faith – of one who embodies mercy over the Law.

Where, Matthew tells us that Joseph had plans to *"quietly divorce Mary"* because she became pregnant before they were married. (1:19). However, heaven would intervene, and Joseph is led to keep Mary as his wife and to raise the child as his own. What an act of obedience, to be sure, but more an act of mercy!

"Go and learn what this means (Jesus once said): *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."* *For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* (Matthew 9:13)

If grace is getting what we don't deserve, mercy is not getting what we do deserve. Such is God's way with us. Where, Jesus would eventually make the long journey to share the Good News of the gift of God's love, bidding us now – in His name – not only to teach, but to show the world what mercy looks like. Mercy with a face!

Where, finally, there is ...

[Slide # 5] 4. Mary: Jesus Chooses His Father's Will over His own.

Where, before the Magi began their journey, before the shepherds come to share the Good News, before Joseph shows mercy, Mary, by sheer grace and faith in her Savior says, "Yes."

We read in Luke chapter 1:

"I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me according to your word." (1:38)

Where, none of the Nativity seems logical, but in faith Mary says, *"Not my will but yours be done."* Something that Baby of hers would one day say in a garden, the night before his death. Yes, Jesus understood choosing God's will over His own when He said:

"For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me." (John 6:38)

Or, when He taught His disciples to pray:

"Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10)

And again, in that moment of great anguish – but yet greater faith:

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42)

Choosing God's will over His own was a sign that Jesus knew His mission. He embraced His purpose – to make that journey across the cosmos to bring Good News that God truly loves ... O yes, He so loves us!

[Slide # 6] 5. Jesus: By Grace & the Holy Spirit, We, Too, Are Led to These Things.

Where, no doubt, the center of the Nativity is this Savior – the Gift, the Good News – Mercy in a manger ... embodying God's unfathomable love ... to bring us to Himself so that one day we would be brought eternally to Him. And where, until that time, we – like all of the followers in the Nativity – have Good News to share in His name.

Yes, Jesus has entrusted us with a Gift:

"Very truly I tell you, all who have faith in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12)

Wherein, we, too, are bid to make the journey, daily trusting and believing that it still makes all the difference in our lives, and can make the difference in the lives of those to whom we proclaim and live it!

Yes, whether long or short on this journey, we can, like the Magi, bring gifts to those in need. Like the shepherds, ours is a word of encouragement or service by our very presence, for someone who is stuck in their darkness. Like Joseph, let your holy presence in the life of another quietly support and bless them. Like Mary, let your faith motivate you to quietly serve, as Isaiah declares about us all:

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" (Isaiah 52:7)

[Slide # 7] Child of God, mercy is not something to be stockpiled or stashed, but something to be shared.

Wherein, like the Magi, the shepherds, Joseph, Mary, and yes, even Jesus Himself, we embark on that lifelong

mission – that mission of mercy – in *“declaring the praises of Him, who brought us out of the darkness and into His marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9)

“Freely you have received; freely give.” (Matthew 10:8)

Who knew those Nativity sets could say so much?

Amen.

[Friday E-mail:]

[To the tune “Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice” or “Lord Jesus Christ, Thou Hast Prepared”]

*Beside Thy manger here I stand, dear Jesus, Lord and Savior,
A gift of love within my hand to thank Thee for Thy favor.
O take my humble offering; my heart, my soul, yea, ev'rything
Is Thine to keep forever.*

Wouldn't you agree? That among the true gifts of this blessed season are all of the songs? And I don't mean all of the secular songs like (“Rocking around the Christmas Tree” or “Dominic the Donkey”), but those that speak to the heart of what this time of year is all about ... the ones that tell the story of ... Jesus!

Like the one I sang at the outset of this devotion; Paul Gerhardt's hymn, “Beside the Manger Here I Stand.” Though not among any of his hymns in our hymnal, it speaks to the heart of the season, taking up a Reformation-like stance against all of the trappings of what the season has become ... refusing to be swayed or lulled into the world's way of celebrating ... drawing that proverbial “line in the sand,” this far, no further. Yes, this is a season about Jesus, or it's about nothing!

Yes it is! Where, with other “Songs of the Savior,” we'll be singing on Sunday and in the coming weeks, our Lord bids us to rejoice in Him ... to rejoice in our salvation. Yes, what a glorious song to sing, as we are clothed in the precious grace, mercy and peace of the Lord's coming, who even now, deigns to descend into our midst. Where, aside from all of the songs, another true joy of this season comes in saying “Yes” to Him when He calls,

*O grant me this abundant grace, and let it be Thy pleasure
That I may be Thy dwelling-place, dear Savior, Sweetest Treasure!
O let me be Thy manger-bed, then shall I lift my lowly head
With joy beyond all measure.*

This be our prayer. Here I stand! Here *we* stand!

SYOS