

Sermon 12 24 18 Christmas Eve 10 PM

Tonight we celebrate with holy words and music the birth of our savior. His birth is a fact. The circumstances are a matter of legend — legend that is probably based in fact. We believe he was born in a stable and laid in a manger because the town was so crowded there was no other place for them to stay. And if so, it was cold. I've been in Bethlehem in the winter and yes, it does get cold. I have seen snow on the streets in Bethlehem in the winter. So Jesus was not born in the comfy tropics.

And who was there? We hear about Wise Men coming to visit him later. But who came right away? Who were led there by angels right away? Scruffy, illiterate, dirty shepherds. People who handled sheep — pretty much the dumbest animals you can raise. So fancy, dancy Angels communicated with the dirty shepherds and told them to come. Curious.

And then there was Mary, just post birth, exhausted, and she gets a visit from some shepherds who smell a lot like sheep — *and* their sheep! How'd you like that while you're still feeling nauseous and laying on a bunch of hay on a cold stable floor that's covered with manure - just post labor and birth— exhausted?

Not very romantic is it?

No. Let's save the romance and glory for the second coming. What is most important about this first coming is that Jesus was

born totally helpless, a human infant — just as we are *always* totally helpless before him.

Oh, we have grand and glorious notions about ourselves. I am an American. I make a good living. I do good things. I obey the law. I behave myself. I live in a nice neighborhood. I have earned respect. And that's all well and good. But as Luther realized, we can't earn salvation. God's love is unconditional. God loves us no matter who we are and what we've done. We can come from a good neighborhood and do good works until we're blue in the face, and frankly, we are taught to do good works until we're blue in the face, but that isn't what saves us. We are saved because God loves us. God pours out *grace* upon us. Everything we are, everything we want to be is because God loves us — unconditionally. And we've never done anything, can't do anything to deserve that love. As we hear from Titus, "...he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but *according to his mercy.*"... "so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

The poet and priest John Donne lived his life in fear that somehow he wasn't one of the chosen ones, that somehow he wasn't saved by God's grace. He was convinced that not everyone was — I mean, how could Jesus save everyone? He believed you had to be chosen. Surely, not *everyone* could deserve salvation!

Surprise! That's the beauty of it. Everyone does deserve salvation. We are all loved — unconditionally.

We are all chosen by God. That's how a helpless infant, born in squalor can change the world — and keep on changing it. Right up to this very day. And beyond.

God's gift of love is bigger than we know — bigger than we can ever comprehend.

That's why it's best to start out with the simple image of human baby in a manger, in a stable, in a little poor, conquered, forsaken country on the shores of the Mediterranean. That's not too much to take in. That's not too much to comprehend.

Let's start there...

Because then we get into the real glory that is beyond the glory of a heavenly host, a few thousand angels or so... Because then we get into the real glory of healing of body and spirit, of heart and mind. then we get into the real glory of unconditional love — boundless and everlasting. When we can trust in that enough to reach for it and believe we can deserve it and hold it — then we can know the true scope, the length and breadth — the joy of God's love for us. Then maybe, just maybe we can believe in it.

It's hard to imagine, isn't it?

That's why we have to start with something simple — like a baby — a baby in a manger.