

***The Perfect Gift***  
**Christmas Eve Meditation on selected verses in Matthew 1, Luke 1, and John 1**  
**December 24, 2014 (McCabe United Methodist Church)**  
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For many of us in this room, this hour of worship is one of our favorite hours of the entire year: the sanctuary is gorgeous...we may be with family we don't often get to see...we sing familiar carols whose words bring comfort and joy...we light candles together...and we hear a story we've perhaps been hearing since we were too young to even remember.

Yes, some of us have come here with pain in our hearts, or with fear about our lives or the state of the world...but, we've likely come because we trust that *this* worship service will remind us of God's presence in the midst of it all. And the familiarity of the story helps, doesn't it?

When the reader reads the words, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus..." we can kind of lean back in our pew and relax. We know these words. We know this story.

There was the census called by the Roman government. Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem. There was probably a donkey. While they were in Bethlehem, they couldn't find a suitable place to stay – the town was so crowded because of the census – so they ended up in whatever constituted a barn back then. Mary went into labor...and she wound-up having to use a manger as a crib for her newborn.

Outside of town, a pack of shepherds ended up hearing about this birth when an angel of God appeared to them and said, "Do not be afraid – I'm bringing you *good* news of great joy for all people: to you is born in Bethlehem a Savior. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Suddenly, a whole bunch more angels showed up and they started singing, "Glory to God and peace on earth to all!" The shepherds then headed into town to find the baby Savior. When they found the little family, they told Mary and Joseph why they were there – and then, when they left, they couldn't help but sing God's praises and tell everyone what they'd just experienced. //

So many of us who are here today know this story so very well. And, as is the case with anything we know well, we can take this story for granted: the words can seem so familiar that we miss some of the meaning...or we sentimentalize it so much that the real power of the story disappears.

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I was reading Luke 2:1-20 while visiting someone in one of our local nursing homes yesterday,

and I was particularly struck by a part of this story that had never really hit me before as anything all that important – the part where the angel says to the shepherds, “*This* will be a sign for you: you will find the child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

I'm so used to seeing nativity scenes depicted with baby Jesus wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger that, when I read those words on the page, they don't usually make much of an impact on me.

But, yesterday, they did: “*This* will be a sign for you: you will find the child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

With Bethlehem so full of people for the census, it's highly unlikely that the baby Jesus was the only baby in Bethlehem that first Christmas night. He probably wasn't even the only *newborn* baby. So the angel couldn't simply say to the shepherds, “Just go into town and find the baby.”

The angel didn't even say, “Ask around to find out where Mary and Joseph are staying – they're a young couple, newly married, in town from Nazareth for the census. You'll find them eventually.” No. The sign – the significant thing – was that *this* newborn baby, wrapped in bands of cloth, would be *lying in a manger*.

A newborn wrapped in bands of cloth was likely not an uncommon thing back then. We swaddle infants today – though, now, we have fancy blankets available for purchase at any store that sells baby items. How baby Jesus was clothed was likely not the significant part of this sign. But, I'm guessing that not all that many newborns in Bethlehem were using a *manger* as their crib.

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“Do not be afraid,” the angel said to the shepherds, “for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

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I've heard it said that, if the good news of Jesus Christ isn't good news for the poor and lowly, it isn't good news.

Shepherds were outcasts in Jesus' day. They lived outside of town, surrounded by animals. They smelled. They had their own rules about how to function in society. There wasn't much “good news” for them, in general. Yet...the angels appeared to *them* bringing good news of great joy for *all* people – even shepherds.

The fact that God had been born into the world as a helpless infant was already good news enough. What's more was that the baby Savior had to use a *manger* as a bed...an animal's feeding trough. Can you imagine?

Never, ever sentimentalize that one fact about Christmas. God being born in a barn and put to sleep in an animal's feeding trough *is* what makes this story good news of great joy for *all* people.

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In our four biblical gospels, only three tell any sort of Christmas story. In Matthew, the focus is on Joseph. Matthew is also where we learn about the visit from the wise men – a story we'll hear in worship the first weekend of January.

Mark doesn't bother with Christmas at all. Mark begins his Gospel when Jesus is all grown-up and ready to begin his ministry of teaching and healing.

We've heard Luke's story tonight, too. Luke is the one who gives us most of the characters and props in our nativity scenes: the holy family, shepherds, angels, animals, the barn and the manger.

Then, in the Gospel of *John*, Christmas is mentioned in one single verse.

John chapter one, verse fourteen is John's Christmas story: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." God's eternal Word – the Christ who was present with God, as part of God, since the beginning of time – entering this world to live among us.

In Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible called *The Message*, John 1:14 reads this way: "And the Word became flesh, and moved into the neighborhood." My neighborhood. Your neighborhood. The neighborhood across town you try avoid because it's where the poor people live...or because it's where the rich people live...or because it's where your enemy lives.

*"And the Word became flesh, and moved into the neighborhood..."*

The baby Savior in the manger is God's way of saying, "I'm here for *all of you*. No place isn't good enough for me. No person isn't worthy of my mercy. No neighborhood isn't deserving of my presence.

"I'm here to be good news of great joy for every single one of you. Rich, poor, middle-class...black, white, brown...happy, sad, broken, friendless. All of you. You *all* deserve me. And you all deserve good news."

It's what makes Jesus Christ, God born among us, the Perfect Gift. Today. Tomorrow. Always. Thanks be to God. Merry Christmas.