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“Unexpected Presence(ts?)”

Christmas Eve Sermon, Luke 2:1-20

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CHRISTMAS EVE...Luke 2:1-20

[video - "Unexpected Christmas"]

Well, there you have it – loosely based on actual events...the real story of God's unexpected journey to bring the human race back to God, because as the boy playing God says in the clip, "It's hard to be friends with someone when you don't like what they're doing." I don't even need to preach now....but I will, of course!

I think it's so delightful to see a bunch of kids creating that kind of fresh imagery. And you have to admit -- the whole picture postcard nativity scene is beautiful, with the angels and the wise men, the cattle are lowing – whatever that means... and the shepherds -- even if the shepherds DO look like they're wearing X-ray goggles!

But did you ever stop to wonder about the reality of that lovely little story? Not the truth of it – I have no doubt about the truth of it, but is it real? ... did it really happen like that?

Tonight, we'll take the time to look at the story in light of the archeology and the history, the geography and of course the actual human experience, and hopefully we'll find out more about God and about ourselves.

Over the last 4 Sundays we've been using Adam Hamilton's book about the Christmas Story—specifically, parts of the last chapter -- to look a little more deeply in to the story, and I think we'll find that the story is a bit messier, a bit grittier, and a bit more difficult than we thought, so we'll also discover as we dig in that it becomes more real for us, and even more unexpected.

First of all... one person – God sends one person -- not legions – not an army of angels who could easily whip us into shape, but one gentle preacher and healer -- the prince of heaven, God's own son, born to a couple of peasants, in the form of the weakest, most vulnerable, most **dependent** creature you can imagine – a baby whose life ends up being quite another unexpected journey. A baby placed in a manger.

Not a beautiful soft crib with fluffy pillows and blankets like one would expect for a prince or a creator of the universe... but a manger. And what exactly is a manger? The online dictionary defines a manger as a box or trough in which food for livestock is placed, in a barn or stable. It's usually carved into the wall or a large free standing stone.

A trough for animal slop? God's only son, the prince of heaven, comes to earth as a helpless infant and His first resting place was a feeding trough, filled with sharp, pokey, flea-infested hay, wrapped in cloths, which you know were probably not sparkling clean, bleached white linens, but whatever rags they brought with them or found around the house! And it must be important because as Adam Hamilton points out, Luke mentions that the child will be lying or laid in a manger three times... 2:7, 2:12, & 2:16.

And where do we find this manger -- this feeding trough? Not in a barn like we think of barns -- all painted red with horse stalls and riding tack on the walls. This was most likely a cave under Joseph's family's house. It would be place where the animals would be brought in to protect them from bandits and the cold desert nights. the typical house of 1st century Judea and Palestine was a kind of split level affair with the main level being for cooking and eating and family gatherings -- like game nights I suppose -- while the upper room would be the sleeping area and guest room -- the Greek word is *kataluma*, which also translates as 'inn' -- so instead of translating the passage as "no room in the inn," perhaps we should say the guest room was no place for them.

This would be one room if they were a poor family, and then downstairs was the stable, usually an existing cave in the soft limestone, scraped or carved out to accommodate the livestock. This had the added benefit of warming the upper sleeping room.

Now there's a couple of different ways that one can think about the ambience of a barn or stable environment. Usually people focus on the more unpleasant aspects of animal husbandry. Like the little angels in the video who were horrified that baby Jesus could be born in a stable, surrounded by animals and, "filled with poo!" Don't you love it when kids from the city visit the country for the first time -- P U! What's that smell?!?! Ewww! It smells like --- you know....

I have a professor who writes about Jesus being born into "a condition of homelessness, in unsanitary conditions...among the animals and the manure they produce..." -- oh please... as if there were any sanitary conditions anywhere in 1st century Palestine!

It is good to remember that Jesus did indeed come to Earth in solidarity with the underprivileged and the marginalized -- the "wretched of the earth," as the professor calls them...and we would do well not to forget it...

Some people however, have a totally different viewpoint when it comes to farms and livestock...

People raised around livestock –no, not born in a barn! – but people accustomed to it can find the odor of manure and livestock to be the smell of prosperity and a good healthy growing season. I remember when I was a kid we used to take driving vacations from NJ to Illinois to visit the relatives (!). Driving through Illinois I remember miles and miles of dark black soil – acre upon acre of corn and beans and giant farms growing who knows what... and that smell. That farm smell that almost smells good when you get used to it.

You see, the manger is an unexpected symbol of hope and prosperity for those “wretched of the world.” The manger promises nourishment for those who are starving... both physically and spiritually.

Adam Hamilton makes an interesting observation: that our savior, who so often refers to Himself as the bread of life, should be born in a feeding trough where all God’s creatures come to find sustenance....

So who do we find at the manger? What insights can we glean from that motley crew gathered around that humble stone feeding trough in that dark and smelly cave?

There’s Mary and Joseph of course – the unwed teenaged peasant girl, and a hardworking builder of limited means... Jesus’ improbable, illegitimate parents who were expecting in a most unexpected way – first to arrive were the shepherds, then the Magi, even though they are only mentioned in one Gospel - Mark, have been given quite a large place in our Nativity scene.

It is an unexpectedly diverse group, wouldn’t you say?

Now the Magi travelled a long way – probably from the land called Persia – Iraq/Iran/Afghanistan and maybe even further East. Mark never says how many there were. We like to think there were three of them, but we probably only think that because they brought three specific gifts. They weren’t Jewish, they were Pagan, and they weren’t kings either. The Magi were the priestly class of a religion known as Zoroastrianism after a prophet named Zarathustra. They were very wealthy considering the priceless gifts that they brought, and the fact that they could just take a couple

years off to go searching on camels for a baby in some unexpected backwater town in Judea.

Then there are the shepherds and something I consider to be the most unexpected thing of all – Angels! – Thousands of them! Not here to whip us into shape, but singing...Angels singing not to the whole world “‘cuz that would just be weird...” and not announcing the birth of the Christ child to kings and rulers -- but to a group of lowly shepherds ...

Chosen by God to be first on the scene, the kids in the video were right-on when they said, “That’s a lowly job, those blokes could do with some cheering up!”

The shepherds back then were about as close as you could get to being the untouchables of society – these weren’t the day shepherds... These guys worked nights. They were not respected members of the community. They were barely tolerated as a necessary evil. They lived and ate and slept with sheep and with goats ... it’s probably safe to assume that they smelled like a combination of sheep, goats, and un-showered working men. They were not popular.

This was indeed an unexpected and diverse group gathered that night in a cave...

One could assume that they had different reasons for being there – but did they?

This whole unexpected journey – or should I say all of these unexpected journeys – God’s— Mary’s, Joseph’s – the shepherds... yours and mine...All of the journeys intersecting at the crossroads of the manger that night... and this night...

These are all part of God’s great and unexpected plan to finally bring us, all of us, closer to God – to be friends with God...even if we’ve done something really wrong...

They all wanted to get close to God.

Don’t we want that, too? Isn’t that what we all really hunger for at Christmas? Not for anything that we’ll find under the tree... that new iPad or Powertool, -- shoes for me, thanks! -- but for a closeness to God – even if we’ve done something really wrong.

We hunger for meaning in the meaningless. Joy in the joyless and hope in times of despair. We long to know that we are ok – that we are God’s friend ... to know that God loves us even though we may not love ourselves... We are starving for the unconditional

love that God has always had for us. The love that won't let go... no matter what...the bread of Life -- and we find it in the manger at Christmastime.

So whether we're rich like the wise men or poor like the shepherds, Christian, non-Christian, young or old -- it doesn't matter... It doesn't matter who we are because we are all invited -- to the manger-- welcome, even...

But what does matter is how we approach. The shepherds, obviously, were humble in their approach and even the wealthy Magi – as privileged as they were – came to the Holy Child searching with all their hearts ... giving gifts without expectation... Humbly they approached on bended knee – like children – seeking and giving...loving without conditions...

So tonight...feast at the manger... eat of this bread, and make it a part of your own unexpected journey... Accept your gift from God this Christmas and come to the manger ... follow the Christ child and put your lives in His hands because, as John tells us, "All who received him...he gave the power to become Children of God."

This Christmas I invite you to pray this prayer with me...to talk to God and say that you are here and that you are ready to accept Jesus into your life – or back into your life. All you have to do is ask.

So close your eyes and say this prayer quietly along with me...

"Jesus, I'm here, and I come to you tonight like the shepherds and the Magi did so long ago. I come to you, humbly, like a child, to ask that you forgive me for the many ways that I've turned my back to you, oh God. I accept you as my Lord and as my savior. I believe in you and I want you to live in my heart. Make me your child, God, and bring me your joy and your peace. Help me to do your will, to love kindness, and to walk humbly in your name. In Jesus precious name...Amen."