

## **Sage Chapel Christmas Sermon by Emily Richards. December 23, 2024**

The Christmas story is a familiar one, told year after year. A newlywed couple forced to travel for days to a distant city to be counted for a census while the woman was heavy with child. The baby born in a stable amongst the animals because there was no room at the inn. The angels appear to the shepherds. The star, a miracle in the heavens, leads the wise men to visit the new born child. We've all seen plastic, porcelain, or wooden representations of this scene in houses and stores, or on front lawns, throughout each holiday season.

Growing up my family had a Nativity set that we would gently unbox each December and arrange on a table or shelf, carefully surrounding the baby and parents with sheep and shepherds, angels and Magi, horses and donkeys.

This is a story of hope born amidst adversity. And yet, it also tells a story of separation. A closer inspection of the ancient writings find that the details of the story that we see represented today don't all line up with what little is written about Jesus' birth and what scholars understand about the culture and society of the ancient near east. What if I were to offer you, this evening, a slightly different version of events?

Yes, Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem, but nowhere in the few words that we are given does it indicate how far along she was in her pregnancy at that time, it only tells us that while they were there, in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have the child.

So, now I invite you to imagine that the couple may have been in Bethlehem for a while. Perhaps even several weeks or months before Mary gave birth. Time to settle in with Joseph's relations, who would have been obligated by the customs and traditions of the time to offer them shelter. And you may be wondering, what do you mean settle in with Joseph's relations?

You see, there is a key word in this story that we all know that doesn't quite match up with biblical scholars' translation. The word most of learned as "inn" used in this passage means, more accurately, "the spare or upper room in a private house or in a village [...] where travelers received hospitality and where no payment was expected. "This would have been closer to our understanding

of a guest room in the house of one of Joseph's relatives, a room that was upstairs from the main room that the family used, a room which was possibly already filled with other family members who also had come for the census.

And that main room that was downstairs is likely to have had a space attached to it that the animals were brought into for the night or during extreme weather. Because of that within the main living area there were hollows in the ground filled with hay, or other feed, for the animals. These mangers were where the baby would be laid to rest after the birth. Many homes in the Levant were equipped to house animals indoors during the night.

This style of dwelling where a part of the house also doubles as a barn, while uncommon here in the United States, can still be found not only in the Middle East but also in Europe, and was typical of dwellings in that area during this time period. In all likelihood, as opposed to being forced into a dirty cramped outbuilding to give birth, Mary instead labored in the main living area of the house, because the space for guests upstairs was full, or possibly, too small for enough attendants to care for her adequately during the often dangerous act of giving birth.

Dick France shares that "The problem with the stable is that it distances Jesus from the rest of us. It puts even his birth in a unique setting, in some ways as remote from life as if he had been born in Caesar's Palace. But the message of the incarnation is that Jesus is one of us. He came to be what we are, and it fits well with that theology that his birth in fact took place in a normal, crowded, warm, welcoming Palestinian home, just like many another Jewish boy of his time."

If the story of Christmas is, in reality, one of familial hospitality, welcoming distant relatives into a home to literally give birth in their living room, instead of the begrudging assistance of a nameless and faceless innkeeper, how does that change our own understanding of the meaning of this story and this holiday? What if hope isn't born in a stable, but is born right in our midst?

And hope has always been what this story is about. There is a reason that we celebrate this birth, thousands of years later. And there is a reason that we do it each year surrounded by the warmth of family, and not alone in the cold. It's

not because the child was born in a stable, or a relative's home, it's not because the star appeared or the angels sang or the wise people traveled from the east. It's because the teachings of Jesus continue to resonate down the ages. Teachings of love and generosity and acceptance. Teachings of peace and the yearning that we all have for a world in which these ideals are made manifest. It's what Jesus did with his life, after that night, that continues to provoke and challenge and call to us, even now.

Mickelson tells us that "Luke's emphasis in this passage reflects what must have been most important for him and for his early Christian audience: not the specifics of Jesus's birth, but what that birth portended for the world." Ancient teachings like an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth were purposefully replaced with messages to love thy neighbor, pray for your enemy, and the wisdom that, blessed are the peacemakers. These are teachings that challenged the powerful, the status quo. Teachings that threatened the very laws of the temples, and drew the ire, and fear, of the ruling elite. Teachings that were explicit in their opposition to the hoarding of wealth, that warned the people that you cannot serve both God and money. Teachings that, perhaps, most radical of all, demanded that we welcome in the stranger.

And that word, stranger, or *gar* in ancient Hebrew, can often be misunderstood. It doesn't mean the random person next you on the bus or in front of you in line at the grocery store. It means foreigner. Immigrant. Someone who lives among you but has come from afar. Who may not share your beliefs or language. Who dresses differently and eats unfamiliar food. Whose skin and hair are a different shade. These are the people that Jesus instructed his followers to welcome in, these are the people he invites us to embrace, to love.

Along with these subversive messages Jesus challenged the laws of the temple itself, he consorted with the poor and destitute, with those who were shunned and viewed as unclean. And he admonished those around him who did not help those who were most in need.

And the birth story itself reflects this shift as well in that the angels appeared first to the shepherds. And that may not mean much in a modern context, although in some ways our society continues to look down upon those who

live in rural areas and work the land, but in those times the shepherds were amongst those considered to be lowest people in the community. And, to really highlight what that meant, during that time shepherds were socially on par with prostitutes, and tax collectors. And remember this is a story where the characters include unwed mothers, self-obsessed rulers, political refugees, homeless people, poor farmers, magicians, death squads, heavenly visitors, and even creation itself.

Still Jesus preached love. He preached about a God who is love. The Christmas story invites us to consider that love, an all encompassing love, a love that is the spirit of everything, has the potential to change the world. We will never know exactly what happened the night that Jesus was born. So, does it really matter if the truth of this birth didn't include an innkeeper and a donkey? Maybe not, and I'm not encouraging anyone to throw out your beloved nativity sets, but in this world that we live in where alternative facts are lifted up as truth and the wisdom of evidence based seekers is denied, and many among us continue to have their freedom threatened by privilege and power, the truth is important. Even when that truth may feel radical and risky.

This Christmas we have a choice about which story we want to live out. Is it one of a young mother in a stable laboring alone, denied access to warmth and safety? Where divine love is birthed at a distance? Or is it the story of a family welcoming in a young couple, even though it was crowded, and the newborn babe being born amongst us? Jesus' teachings remind us that "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him." And the unending love that some people describe as God, that love is born when we are together. It's in the holy messiness of birth, yes, but also when we choose generosity over wealth, and welcome over fear, and forgiveness over hate. Love is here. It's right here.

Jesus said "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds. "What light will you shine on this holy night? What story will you bring forth into this beautiful and broken world?"