



December 24, 2006  
*Christmas Eve*

Luke 2:1-20  
*Finding Room*  
M. Craig Barnes

Tonight we have left our homes and celebrations of a holiday to ensure that we are also participating in a holy event. Even if just for an hour, we have set aside the excitement and hustle of shopping and traveling, the arrival of family and friends, the extraordinary meals and the beautifully decorated homes in order to take a journey back to Bethlehem. There we join Christians from all over the earth who are doing the exact same thing this evening – worshipping the Christ Child, our newborn Savior.

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When families and friends get together, it is not long before someone starts to tell stories. Many of you have recently been reunited with family. That means that either to your chagrin or to your joy, you will soon hear the phrase “Remember when....” Others are spending Christmas away from people that you love, and the yearning for them will also make you remember stories from your past. Whether you tell these stories to others or only to yourself, it is impossible to get through Christmas Eve without a story or two. We need these stories. In a world that tries to pull us in so many conflicting directions, these stories serve as a tether to our past and to our identities. They root us in the relationships, joy, and even the pain that have created our lives.

Now we gather in church as a family of faith to remember the most important story of all. It is as if your preacher is saying, “Remember when... Remember when God entered the world? Remember the night he was born to us?” It happened thousands of years ago and in a place thousands of miles away, but it is a story we cannot forget. In a moment, we can return to the donkey in the stall and the smell of hay. A couple from out of town is exhausted and staying in a barn because they cannot find any other place to stay. The woman gives birth to her son that night, wraps him in cloth, and lays him in a manger. Soon shepherds arrive and tell an amazing story about the heavens opening up in song. It is a story that we tell carefully to our children so they will remember every detail as if they were there when it happened and as if this is a story about them, which, of course, it is.

To get the story straight, however, we must remember that it is quiet and subtle. It is filled with drama, but so easy to miss. Not all of the people in the drama made it to the manger. In fact, most people missed the birth of Emmanuel completely. If there was a story that made it into the Bethlehem papers, it was the story about the great census that Caesar had ordered. The town was jammed with people who traveled there to be enrolled so the emperor could get his tax problems ironed out. Even Luke has to date the quiet arrival of Jesus by telling us who was in charge at the time – Caesar Augustus, and the Governor Quirinius. Those were the names people knew. They

were the movers and the shakers of society who could get an idea and force everyone in the empire to move around and return to the cities of their birth to pay their taxes. Everybody knew Caesar and Quirinius. But it would have been easy to miss that couple who were so late in arriving to Bethlehem that there was no room for them in the inns. And who would have thought for one minute that those shepherds were on their way to see a newborn king who would begin a new kingdom that would far outlive all the Caesars.

The Gospel story is almost always not told as the plot to which everyone is paying attention. It is usually the subplot, the story beneath the story. That is God's favorite place to work.

We all know the plot. The plot is about Caesar, which is the name of whatever it is that runs your life. He can be an employer, a dream, or maybe a hurt from the past. He makes you hustle and move around, driving you far from where you want to be. He fills up your life and makes little room for anything else. Caesar is such a recognized part of our lives that no one even questions his power over you. Christmas Eve can be just a little rest along the way from pleasing Caesar. Or, you can remember how the story goes – beneath the surface of all the hustle, a Savior is born to you.

So if there is to be any real and abiding hope for our lives after Christmas, we each have to find our part in the sacred story. There is more than one road that leads down into the subplot of the Bethlehem story. You don't have to take all of them, but you do have to take one to find the arrival of our only hope.

Some of you will take the road of the shepherds. At a time when the story of your life was so very dark and when you had about settled into the darkness, God broke into the night to say you are not alone. What you experienced can only be called a miracle. You're afraid to talk about it because no one would believe you if you did, and they would try to talk you out of it. But you know what happened to you when you were alone, despairing, in trouble, or sick. God intervened. It was so dramatic, you could swear that you heard angels sing. After the shepherds had their miraculous experience, they didn't really care that it, and they, were unbelievable. It was their Christmas gift, and no one could take it away so they went on their way praising God. Maybe you know the way of this road as well.

Others of us will take the road of the Magi. This is the path taken by seekers who are simply in search of answers. On this road there are no miracles. The wise men simply followed the light they had because they were the philosophers and scientists of their day. When they got lost, they asked for directions. Although this journey takes longer, eventually they, too, found Jesus. The rational journey of the mind can also be a very spiritual pilgrimage. If that is your path, then you must neither envy nor ridicule the testimony of the shepherds. What is critical is that we all find the one who brings salvation, not how we find our way to him.

Perhaps we still have not come to your journey in the Christmas story. There is still another road to the nativity. Remember when.... Remember when all of this happened, how confused Joseph and Mary were? First came those incredible visits from the angels. Then came

nine months of sheer embarrassment. Now the child has come but so far from home and with such a humble beginning. This is not what any parent has in mind. They looked down at their son: naked, totally helpless, lying in an animal's feeding trough, not much bigger than a loaf of bread, and they remembered what the angels told them about their son when he was conceived. Now they hear what the shepherds tell them about the angels they saw. We are told that in response, "Mary kept all of these things, pondering them in her heart." There it is – the third road to the Savior.

To ponder means to hang onto an experience that is penetrating but unclear. You don't quite know what it all means, but you have taken the story to heart. You couldn't shake it even if you wanted to. It has grabbed hold of your life. Mary is still pretty much in the dark about what God is up to with her son. It is as if a flicker of light has appeared in the silent night, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

For many of us, the arrival of Jesus Christ into our lives is not what we had in mind any more that it was for Mary and Joseph. God is born into our lives, usually as a great disruption of the plans we did have. But at Christmas we remember how the story goes. Life is not something we plan; it is something we receive. Imagine what would have happened to the world if Mary had lived the quiet life she had planned. Imagine what would have happened to you if you got everything you wanted as a young adult. But when your plans were interrupted, mostly you were left pondering your confusion. You didn't see the skies miraculously open like the shepherds, and you didn't think your way into salvation like the wise men. But through the strange turns life has taken, you have come to see that God is up to something that will lead to salvation.

There they are: three very different roads that all lead to God's good news for the world. But all of them lead to the story beneath the story. The people we pray for tonight are those who can find no room in their lives for this sacred subtext. We pray for those who are too satisfied with life, like Caesar and Quirinius; those who are too busy, like the innkeeper; and those who are too certain they know the story to enter it, like the religious leaders. Take whatever path seems right for your life, but by all means enter the real story of Christmas. Your hope, peace, joy, and your ability to love again depend on it. Amen.