

**Glad Tidings**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2014.

*To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah.*

*Luke 2:11*

The waiting is over. Every year we wonder how we're going to be ready for Christmas and somehow it all comes together. While the secular world has driven this season into a generic holiday season devoid of any specific faith celebration, we are here to celebrate the birth of Christ. Crèche scenes serve to remind us of those dramatic events when the world learned of the glad tidings that the Savior was born.

The birth of Christ is the axis of human history when the Creator interceded with the creation. God entered into the human condition in the person and life of Christ in sacrificial and unconditional love for us. The world has never been the same since. Where there was no hope, we now rejoice in the possibilities of what seems impossible. The birth of Christ is the culmination of a long anticipated Messiah who would liberate Israel from oppression. All that was foretold by the prophet Isaiah culminated in the birth of a savior who rescues us from alienation and restores us to a right relationship with God and all creation. Christ's birth is as an expression of God's power and presence that is greater than any act of hatred or violence. The birth of Christ in such a simple setting reminds us that God was humbled to become one of us to bring peace and justice.

Tradition says that the shepherds are the first to respond to go to the birthplace to see what had taken place. Upon their arrival, they find Mary and Joseph with their newborn child lying in a manger for a crib. The significance of this is that the Christ child whose crib is a feeding trough is destined to be the bread of life for us. The shepherds who are the first visitors at the birthplace were way down on the social scale in their day and time. That hadn't always been the case. In earlier times, shepherds were of greater importance because Palestine's economy depended largely upon sheep herding. So highly esteemed were those guardians of the sheep that the ancient psalmist referred to God as the Great Shepherd.

By the time of the birth of Christ, the alien urban cultures of Greece and Rome made a greater impact upon the economy and sheep herding was of less importance, leaving the shepherds to brave the elements day and night as they watched over their flocks. Shepherds had little in the way of material things, yet they were people of courage and determination. Thus, it was appropriate that the news of Christ's birth was given first to the lowly shepherds. Jesus as the Good Shepherd will not abandon his flock and is willing to lay down his life for us.

One of my favorite depictions of the Nativity is a classic painting by the 15th century Venetian artist Giorgione who brought a lyric mystery to his art. He places the holy family at the entrance of a cave on a hillside. The shepherds, dressed in tattered clothes, have come in adoration of this child who holds so much promise for them. They represent the poor and lowly that Jesus came to save. The artist has placed the newborn child out in the light of the day as Mary listens to the shepherds telling of the message of the angels. The Christ child is the central focus for whom all creation pauses in that one great moment of hope.

If you go to the Bethlehem today, you can see the traditional site identified as the birthplace of Jesus by Saint Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine. It is, in fact, a cave over which is built the great 4th century Church of the Nativity. With the conversion of Constantine and the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D, Christians were allowed to practice their faith openly without persecution. The doorway of the Church of the Nativity was built only about four feet high to prevent anyone from riding his horse into the church and requiring him to dismount. For centuries, all who enter that holy place have to bow in reverence.

There is significance that Jesus' first home was a stable cave. It was there in this humble setting that the most extraordinary man who ever lived was born. So much happened between his birth and death. This newborn child grew to full manhood and in a brief period of just three short years of his ministry touched more lives than most of us ever hope to. His impact on the world has been like no other. He provided hope and reconciliation where there was hopeless alienation. Having begun life in a stable cave, at the end of his life his body was placed in a borrowed cave.

That we have a Savior to save us from ourselves is greatest gift we have and the most important gift we can give to each other. That God came to us in the person of Christ tells us that God has will not give up on us. What we celebrate is that great chasm between the lover and the beloved is closed. Healing is possible in any of us. Long standing animosities between family,

friends and coworkers, between police and public can be healed when both are willing to put aside differences in order to heal the distrust and be reconciled. Christ is our agent of reconciliation who makes right our relationships within ourselves, with each other and with God.

In life, when we can go astray and are headed in the wrong direction, Christ is our modern day GPS system to guide us to the right way. On this most holy night, we rejoice with the shepherds in the glad tidings that a Savior is born. He is the bright light in the darkness of what we can't see or refuse to know and understand.

Come to the Bethlehem of your hearts and see this gift of love that has been given us. Treasure this night in every way because the good news is that we have been given the gift of hope. That God became one of us is the greatest gift we can receive and the patterning our lives after Christ is the best gift we can give to others.