

"THE GEOGRAPHY OF JESUS: HEAVEN TO THE STABLE"

Isaiah 9:2-7 Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2019 Christmas Eve

York Center Church of the Brethren

Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

When I was in high school we had a flock of sheep. Sometimes on cold and wet winter nights I tried to get them into the sheep pen so they would be warm and dry- but unless I was offering them food- they wouldn't always come inside. I couldn't chase them because they just ran in all different directions. They didn't answer to their names so I couldn't just call them. It was a frustrating enterprise. I often thought, "If I could just be a sheep, maybe they would follow me inside."

And right there, I think, is what we are celebrating tonight. The "incarnation" is when God became a human being in the person of Jesus. And when I have had a hard time understanding that concept of incarnation, I remembered my sheep. I remember wondering if they would follow me if I was one of them.

Throughout history our God has always been a "hands-on" God. In the Old Testament God was considered so awesome and holy that people knew they could not look at God's face or even speak God's name. God spoke to the people through priests and prophets, through kings and leaders and yet, they often didn't listen. They strayed far from where God wanted them to be. So finally, God said, like so many parents, "Do I have to come down there?" And God did. God didn't come to us out of the clouds like a superhero or on the throne like royalty or in the Temple like a wise priest. God came to us as one of us- as a newborn baby we could hold in our arms.

There isn't much on this earth that is more helpless than a newborn baby. Even baby sheep struggle to their feet and walk soon after they are born. But human babies are totally dependent on their caregivers for years. When they are born they can do nothing for themselves. They are vulnerable and fragile. And this is how God chose to enter into our world. Unbelievable!

As we have traveled through the "Geography of Jesus" during the season of Advent, we have found ourselves in the same places those closest to Jesus found themselves- in the holy city of Jerusalem, in the wilderness, and in the little town of Bethlehem. And what we have found in each location is the presence and power of God. The presence of God makes each location a holy place, a place of significance. Even if it has no meaning to the larger world- God's presence makes it a sacred place. Tonight, we look at the manger, a crude,

wooden feed trough for animals, and it means more to us than the fanciest, most expensive crib you could buy for a newborn.

Priest Henri Nouwen once wrote, *"We can't be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there."*

Jesus came to be with us as one of us, to walk in our wilderness so he could lead us out of it and into the arms of God. Everything about his birth shows God's desire to upend the values and priorities of human society. When he was born in the stable the angels didn't come to Mary and Joseph- they appeared to shepherds, outside of town in the fields.

The holy family was not visited by the messengers of heaven that night. But the shepherds were-- the dirty, smelly shepherds. And as soon as they heard the news they ran into town- where their kind were most unwelcome- and they saw the baby. Then they left and told everyone about the child.

This is the beginning of God's great reversal, the transformation of the world where the ones on the bottom are greeted by angels; where the hope for the world is born in a barn. And we are invited to be a part of it.

We welcome this baby to our world all the while knowing that he will change it forever. We see him in the manger tonight but we know he cannot stay there. This baby will grow up and he will preach and teach and heal. And he will get into trouble- lots of trouble. The religious establishment will turn against him because they will be afraid of his authority. The political powers will try to get rid of him because he threatens their wallets and their power. He will finally be killed like a common criminal.

But that is not the end of his story because three days after his death he will walk out of the tomb as the Risen Christ, alive and living with us, even today.

This is the baby we welcome tonight. This is the surprise that burst into the world and turned it upside down. This is what no one was expecting, Emmanuel, God with us, God down here, in our manger, breathing our air. This is the God we worship, the One we meet in Jesus, the One who became one of us so that we might choose to be one of his.

Let us welcome this baby tonight and not be afraid to follow him to the ends of the earth.

He will change our lives forever.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

