



## A Christmas Homily

Christmas, December 25, 2025  
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

The stubborn, little, Galilean donkey began to slowly tap his way up the long sloping trail that led to a small cluster of white plaster houses on the narrow ridge above him. On the grey limestone path below the animal moved the soft shadow of a pregnant young woman, her robes fluttering lightly in the cool Judean breeze.

At her side walked a dark-eyed Jew with the rough, calloused hands of a carpenter. His steady stride had covered 75 miles in the last four days. Now, finally, he gazed upon the boxy white homes that were their final destination—Bethlehem.

It had been a long trip for Joseph's young wife, Mary.

They had come down the high ridge that Nazareth straddled—

—down through the fertile plain of Esdraelon,

—past the leafless, wintering groves of tamarisk and wild olive,

—through long dry pastures dotted with heaps of white-washed stones, they followed the Roman road that lay like a long grey ribbon over the rocky hills of southern Galilee.

From Galilee the little donkey ambled his way down from the limestone highlands into the rich red valley of Jezreel.

—through tiny towns of sun baked bricks,

—through orchards and vineyards,

—through freshly cut and plowed fields that looked like a quilt of vast size from the heights of northern Samaria.

They slept in rude road-side shelters that were little more than a circle of rocks and a lean-to covered in palm fronds. They ate their simple meals from a single copper pot hung over a little fire of thorny kindling.

More than once, as they traveled, Joseph had to urge the donkey to the side of the road at the sound of drumming hooves, covering his face as Rome's couriers came pounding by—lifting up a cloud of dust and throwing stones.

Joseph didn't need to be reminded that it was Caesar and Rome that ordered him to register his properties, possessions, and inheritance in his home-town of Bethlehem. As commanded, they had come down the new Roman road, over the ancient and twisting hills toward Judea.

Further south, the sweeping country-side of Samaria gave way to Judea's narrow valleys and rough, rocky hills. Hard, wild-looking shepherds grazed their flocks on the steep slopes seemingly oblivious to the busy roads that were packed with pilgrims bound for the Holy City—Jerusalem. But Joseph and Mary were not bound for the city of David's reign, but the city of David's youth. Within sight of the gleaming spires of the Temple, they turned south toward Bethlehem.

They passed through the fields where Boaz once found Ruth gleaning and climbed the terraced slopes leading to the gate of the City of David before disappearing into her narrow, crowded streets.

We follow them up those terraced steps as the sun drops like a flaming ball beyond the horizon, reaching the city as darkness settles over the small Judean town. Under the deep velvet sky, peppered with stars, we follow Bethlehem's quiet cobblestone streets until we see a ray of lantern

light coming from a crack in a hillside door. It's a cave made over into a stable, with roomy stalls lining the limestone walls. There is the musty odor of cut grass, as well as the milky scent of cows and goats. We hear the chuff-chuff of animals working their cud.

But from one stall comes the soft, steady sound of regular breathing. There the young mother Mary lies sleeping on a bed of golden straw, blankets tucked about her quiet form, her head resting on the rolled cloak of her husband, Joseph.

In the back of the stall is a wide shelf of piled limestone slabs, the topmost having been chiseled out to make a shallow trough for hay and barley oats. But besides the pungent smell of many grasses, there comes from this manger the mingled odors of oil, salt and myrtle dust. For in this feed-box sleeps a new-born Child.

For Joseph, sleep was impossible. He paced about the stable in a kind of march, regularly checking to see that mother and Child were resting naturally and peacefully. With excitement he remembered how quickly it had all happened. With frustration he recalled how little he could do to help. When Mary's time came, it was too late to get a mid-wife. Joseph could only warm a little water . . . and leave her to herself.

It was Mary that shook the new-born infant to start His breathing. It was she who bathed and oiled and salted him—as was the Jewish custom. It was she who powdered the child with sweet smelling myrtle dust and wrapped him snugly in the long bands of swaddling linens. And now, she slept... while Joseph kept his tireless watch, lest anything disturb her rest.

That's why he jumped so at the low rumble of voices and the shuffling of feet on the slope outside.

He opened the door to find a group of dirty, bearded faces staring in at him. They had the rough look of shepherds. One of them breathed a greeting and asked, to Joseph's surprise: "Has a child just been born here?" "Yes," said another, "here in this stable?"

Joseph was perplexed, and not a little worried. "Why do you ask, shepherd? How is it your business?"

"Don't be afraid of us, sir" the hulking visitor replied, "We are friends. We have heard wonderful things about a certain new-born Infant."

"Well... yes." Joseph answered. "A child was born here tonight."

"And has he been laid in a manger?" Asked another of the men, unable to conceal the excitement in his voice.

"Well... yes..." said Joseph. "But you see, there was no other place, so we had to..."

"Then God be praised!" The shepherds suddenly exclaimed, as though it was no disgrace to place a new-born in a feed box for cattle—but rather the most wonderful thing in the world.

"Listen," said the shepherd nearest the door, "We have seen the most unbelievable sight this evening, and it concerns you and this Child. We were in the fields, tending to our flocks. The sky was dark except for the stars, and the air was a little chilly. It was like any other night this time of year. Some of us were sleeping, others were talking by the fire.

All of a sudden, there was this bright light—brighter than anything you can imagine. We were scared, I won't deny that, absolutely terrified."

"But then we heard a voice—an Angel. He told us not to be afraid, because he had good news for us—glad tidings."

"I'll never forget how he said it, "Unto you is born this day, in the city of David—a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you. Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

"And you'll never believe this," said another of the shepherds quickly, stepping forward from the shadows, "I wouldn't either, but I saw it with my own eyes—we saw it." They all nodded. "It was as though the whole sky split open like the roof of a tent. As far as we could see there was an army of angels, rank upon rank upon rank of them, and every one of them was singing: 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.'"

Then the shepherds fell silent, as though somewhat startled by the sound of their own story. They were simple, rough-cut, country folk—smelling of sheep and grass. Yet here they had been talking like poets and visionaries. They wondered if, on any other night, they would have believed their own story.

They were not surprised, for some reason, when Joseph assured them that he believed every word of their incredible tale. He opened the door and took them down on tip-toe past the rows of stalls until they came and looked in where Mary lay on her bed of blankets and straw.

At the soft rustle of many feet the young mother stirred, and on the makeshift limestone cradle, the little infant's eyes fluttered open. The wide-eyed shepherds bowed their heads in worshipful silence.

In hushed tones, Joseph quickly recounted to his startled wife the incredible story of the shepherds. She listened carefully and took it all in, weighing every word. When he had finished, she looked up at the visitors from the nearby fields and said, "His Name. . . Is Jesus."

And then the shepherds returned, they went back to their sheep. They went back to leading them, feeding them, finding them water. They went back to the daily tasks of their every-day lives. They returned, and so must we.

To offices and homes, Farms and fields, classes and studies. Life goes on, day by day.

But can we return as the shepherds did, glorifying and praising God? That depends upon what we are doing here this morning, and what we see in that manger. Is this all part of an annual ritual? Do we stuff the Christ-child back into the manger year after year, so that we can imagine that we were there and be strangely warmed by the tender scene? Have we gathered again to recall, reread and retell a simple historical event almost 2000 years past?

I pray not. This day and what it means involves far more than memory and imagination. Luther said, "We come to Christmas with open hearts. We listen not to history, but to a gift." Now that we have opened the other gifts, gathered with family—now that we have sung the carols, and looked on the tree—let's look at what we've received that is *really* worth rejoicing over. There is only one such gift,

one that we ought to rejoice over every day of the year. The hymn writer well describes the tag on this greatest of gifts when he says:

*“Christ, from heaven to us descending.  
And in love our race befriending,  
in our need His help extending.  
Saved us from the wily foe.*

*From the bondage that oppressed us,  
from sin’s fetters that possessed us,  
From the grief that sore distressed us,  
We the captives, now are free.*

Yes, like the shepherds, we can return to our daily lives rejoicing in Him, for the Christ-child did not just come to Mary and Joseph or just to shepherds and wise men or even just to a sin-stricken world in general.

He came to us, to you and me. He continues to come to us in His Word. He lives in us.

GOD keeps his promises, and the words of the angel to the stunned shepherds ring out to us also from Christmas to Christmas. “Fear not... for unto YOU is born... a Savior.” Fear not sin or guilt. Fear not pain or sorrow. Fear not life or death. “For unto YOU is born a Savior.”

Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, to men -- good will. Amen.