

## **“GOD IN A MANGER!”**

*Isaiah 9:2,6-7; Luke 2:1-20*

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One of the elementary Sunday school classes was asked to read the Christmas story and then act it out as a class. They took the assignment seriously and got right to work on the production. At show time there was the familiar cast: Joseph, Mary, the shepherds, wise men, a few animals and a couple of angels. But some things were different. There was a makeshift partition behind which Mary was apparently in labor. She groaned loudly. Suddenly, the “doctor” emerged from the “delivery room” in a white coat wearing a stethoscope. The doc went to one of the children, slapped him on the back and gleefully announced, “Congratulations, Joseph. It’s a God!”

With insight beyond their years, these children grasped the essential truth that preachers spend hours trying to articulate, the profound truth that theologians write volumes attempting to explain. That Sunday school class perceived in childlike simplicity that while the birth of every baby is an exciting and life-changing event, this is no ordinary birth. This is **God in a manger.**

Once upon a time there lived a king who had power over all people. His courts were of the richest splendor, his tables heavy with the finest food, his castle filled with beautiful treasures from all over the world. Once, in the cold of winter, the king’s tailor entered the royal chambers with his latest samples of garments made from the finest fabrics. The clothes he had made glistened like water and glittered like gold.

But the king was not pleased. He ordered the tailor out of his chambers, vowing to make his own clothes. The door to the throne room was shut and locked, and the king stayed there for days. The royal court waited with anticipation to see what the king would make for himself. They would surely be blinded by the glory of the king’s royal robes.

The long-awaited day arrived. The door of the throne room opened, and the king emerged. Everyone, especially the tailor, gasped in shock. The king was not dressed in majestic robes of bright colors. No satin or silk adorned his body. Instead, he was dressed in simple, inexpensive and unlikely garments. They were plain of fabric and dull of color. As the king, he had the choice of the finest materials, but had chosen instead to wear the clothes of a peasant. He did not look regal; he looked common. Then he announced to the startled court that he was going into the valley to be with his people.

Down to the valley he went. Down to where the people he ruled lived. He went to their homes and to their jobs. He lived in their houses and worked alongside them in their fields. He

held their babies when they were born, went to the cemetery when they buried their parents, and danced at the weddings of their sons and daughters. He sat with them when they were sick and rejoiced with them when they were well. He celebrated their victories and lamented their defeats. He bragged on their successes and sympathized with their failures. He went where they went, ate what they ate, wore what they wore. He was in every way, one of them.

My friends, **God is that king.** The Bible tells us in John 1:14 that “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” The eternal God came to live with us. Eugene Peterson translates this verse, “*The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.*” That’s what Christmas is all about! First and foremost Christmas is not about presents. Christmas is about **presence**: God’s presence with us.

Christmas is about presence. Christmas is also about **purpose**: God’s purpose in coming to earth, and God’s purpose for our lives. Jesus came not to adorn Christmas cards and to nestle comfortably into the nativity scenes of our homes and churches. Jesus came to change the world.

Every year they read the Christmas story at Nancy’s house. She had heard it many times. It was such a good story, but there was part of it she didn’t like very much. One Christmas she decided to do something about it. She asked if she could read the Christmas story this year instead of her mom or dad. When she came to the part of the story that tells of there being no room for Mary and Joseph in the inn, she said, “Good evening, sir, my wife is going to have a baby tonight. We need a place to stay. Do you have room for us here?” The innkeeper, according to Nancy’s revised version, replied, “Well, our place is crowded, but there’s always room for more. Come on in and make yourself at home.” Nancy closed the Bible and looked up at her family, and said gleefully, “Now, that’s better, isn’t it?” It is always better when we make room for Jesus. That is God’s purpose for Christmas.

When the Minnesota Twins defeated the Detroit Tigers to seize the American League pennant, Minneapolis went wild. More than 55,000 delirious fans gathered in the Metrodome to await the return of the Twins. During the celebration, an interviewer held a microphone to shortstop Greg Gagne and said, “This must be the greatest day in your life!” Without hesitation, the shortstop replied, “Actually, no. That was the moment I invited Jesus Christ into my life.” The birth of any baby changes people’s lives. The birth of this baby is meant to change every life, and not just to make superficial changes, but to change the whole way we look at life. Does your life have purpose and meaning? Have you made room for Jesus?

Christmas is about God’s **presence**; Christmas is about God’s **purpose**; and third, Christmas is about God’s **people**. The reason the birth of Jesus was announced by angels is because God intended the whole world to know. When a baby is born, the news is too good to keep to ourselves. When this baby is born, we need to tell everyone: It’s a God! It’s God in that manger! And he is born for all people everywhere.

During this past year, we said goodbye to several of the saints of this church, including Bob Heuman, who, in December, 1944, during World War II, was stationed in Germany in Hurtgen Forest, anticipating what history would record as the Battle of the Bulge. A heavy winter snow blanketed the forest and made any substantial movement on the part of the soldiers difficult. They were cold, discouraged and bitter. Moving at a snail’s pace in their military vehicles, they noticed several German civilians trudging deliberately up the road ahead of them. After a while, a small, white-frame church became visible. The American soldiers could see the

soft glow of lighted candles in the windows of the church. The German civilians opened the door of the church and there came drifting through the air the singing of those already inside. It was Christmas Eve. They soldiers forgot everything else as they joined their voices and their hearts with the German civilians to sing together of the great joy that had come to the world. That's what Christmas does. That's what Christmas can do.

With fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan and on the streets of our cities, with serial killers in Texas and in Cleveland, with conflict everywhere we turn: in our world, our communities, at work, at churches, in our families, in our hearts — how desperately we need to hear the Christmas message that Christ is born to bring peace to all people everywhere. No person, no group, no nation is outside the circle of God's love.

My friends, it's God in that manger! He is born tonight; born for us; born for all people. He is born this night in Bethlehem, and he is waiting to be born in our hearts. May each of us recognize **God's presence** among us; may each of us seek **God's purpose** for us, and may each of us share this message of love with **God's people** — all people, everywhere. Amen.