

Sermon Christmas Eve 2017 Early: Softly and Gently He Comes for Us

Introduction: Only God Would Come This Way

Merry Christmas! Thank you.

The sweetest of the seasons of the year is upon us;

 Busy yes, but sweet nonetheless for the sharing and giving that goes on;

 For the generosity and welcome and love that are somehow different in this time;

 For the light and the sounds of a greater promise;

 And the brief respite from the toils and labors and the difficulties of life;

 Christmas is here, the season of giving and receiving, the season of love and hope.

And we are all here tonight, alongside Christians and people all over the world;

 Gathered at the manger in Bethlehem;

 We are here by our choosing or by habit or by others' choices for us this Christmas;

 We are here in a home where you and I are always welcome;

 Welcome however far we may have strayed or chosen to stay away;

 Home by God's choosing and as a result of God's love;

 Home where we belong.

And we are in this home together tonight trying to figure out just what this all means;

 And what kind of God would come to be born as one of us;

 Born in the lowliest of places, a stable on the edge of town;

 Rather than a God who comes in power to triumph and glory;

 And overwhelm us into a different kind of life with Him.

The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, once said that only God would come in this way;

 No one else would have come as a little baby, totally dependent on others;

 Coming in a gentle way rather than with an overwhelming power.

I was thinking about what a strange way God has come into our worlds, as a little baby;

As I put out our Christmas decorations and manger scenes at home;

And as I leafed through some of the Christmas books of religious art

We have in our home and in my office;

I know, geeky, but I am a priest after all.

In almost all the art you see depicting the Manger at Christmas, you see power;

You see greatness and sovereignty, rather than lowliness, rather than gentleness;

And the key is usually the gold glow so many of the participants have.

Oh, there are some less powerful looking depictions of the Christmas event;

My favorite being the very primitive depiction of Mary, Joseph and the baby

All in the manger together;

One of those moments when punctuation might have helped the artist;

There was Mary and Joseph comma, and the baby lying in the manger.

But the Holy Family is so very often depicted with halos or golden orbs around their heads

As though there's some special force they have;

There are angels hovering nearby and even the shepherds look a little cleaned up;

It's usually a scene where it's clear that God's got something going on

And we better get in line.

The strangest depiction of the manger scene I saw driving around before Christmas;

And I say strangest, because I think it was mostly in my own mind;

The strangest scene was an inflatable in a yard with a super heroes trio:

The Incredible Hulk, Captain America and Wonder Woman.

And though this is a clearly a secular depiction of something else;

I thought it fit with some of the grander scenes of the stable that first Christmas.

The Incredible Hulk was obviously Jesus, coming with power to crush sin and death and evil;
Captain America, the protecting Joseph, and Wonder Woman, well you get the idea.

Looking backward to Christmas, looking backward in time

After Jesus has shown us the face of God's love for us through His teachings and healings;

And most importantly through His death on the cross for our sins;

And His rising from the dead on Easter to break the power of death;

Looking backward it's easy to see why artists and so many of us

Imagine that first Christmas as a moment revealing God's overarching power.

But nothing could be further from the truth;

God didn't come into the world that first Christmas in His glory and power;

He set that aside to become one of us;

And God doesn't come into our lives today by overpowering us

And pushing aside our free wills;

No, God comes gently, softly, invitingly, so that we may choose God;

For no relationship of love and no relationship worth having

Exists without the free choosing of both parties.

God freely chooses to love us and to be with us just as we are;

And He wants us to freely choose to love Him and to be with Him;

That's the wonder and miracle of Christmas;

And that's the wonder and miracle of God's love through all time.

That First Christmas

The first Christmas was nothing like the depictions of so many artists or the super hero inflatable

The first Christmas was a mess.

Mary and Joseph didn't fly from Nazareth to Bethlehem or ride in a black Uber limousine;

They walked; they probably walked for days from Nazareth.

They may have had a donkey with them to help Mary along the way;

But if you've ever ridden on a donkey, you know it's not the most comfortable way to travel;

It was a dusty road and when they got near to Bethlehem;

Whether they came through Jerusalem or through Jericho and the Jordan River;

They had to climb up 2500 feet in elevation on very rocky terrain;

To make into Bethlehem.

And when they arrived in Bethlehem, there was no room for them;

Every shelter and inn they tried were filled;

There was no place for them;

When Joseph asked, the answer was always the same – no room; you can't stay here.

Finally, these two very ordinary people came to a stable at the edge of town;

A stable used for cattle and storing hay

It was certainly not what they had hoped for;

But it was the only place in the town that had room for them.

And there in the chill of the night air and the dim light of a stable on the edge of town;

With tenderness and love, the man did the necessary things to help his wife;

And with a love that blots out the pain of such moments;

The woman brought forth her first born – a son.

The man held the baby and rubbed him clean;

They wrapped him in some crude pieces of cloth and placed him at the mother's breast;

And the natural marvel of the ages of all humankind ran through both of them;

For with the miracle of birth, there was new life;

But not just any birth and not just any new life.

For the father and the mother had both been told and they both believed;
That this was not just the incredible miracle of a new life coming into the world;
But the miracle of Divine life;
A life that would change the world and open the way for others
To journey with and toward a life lived with God;
Before them was the life that was destined to reach humankind through the centuries;
The life that has beckoned you and me and Christians and people around the world tonight
To Bethlehem and the manger in a lowly stable on the edge of town.

He Journeys Tonight

There is no place that is below the love of God;
No place, no person, no circumstance that God will not come to dwell with us;
To be with us, but He doesn't come in His power and glory;
But in the most gentle, accessible guise so we will welcome Him.

Joseph and Mary journeyed from Nazareth to Bethlehem;
He journeyed from heaven to earth, to Bethlehem, and He is with us here tonight.
That same baby, the Christ child,
The Son of God has journeyed here tonight, to Wayne, PA;
And a different kind of stable – your heart and my heart.

He has come among us, looking for a room to be born again into the world;
To be born into your world and into mine;
To be born so that the love and the grace and the truth and the peace of God;
May fill our hearts and our lives with love and grace and power;
Walking with us on our journeys through life.

He comes to bring light to our darkness;
Peace in the midst of an overly filled life;

Companionship and hope for this life and for the life to come;

He comes with a deep and abiding love and purpose for our living;

That's far greater than any life we can devise on our own.

He comes softly, gently, tenderly, stripped of His power and glory

Seeking to draw us out of ourselves and into a relationship of friendship and love

With the Creator and Sustainer and Redeemer of all that is.

And so on this Christmas Eve, I invite you to look around your life and make room;

I invite you to make room for Christ at the inn of your heart or the stable of your heart,

Depending on how your life is going these days.

Say a little prayer to God tonight to invite Him in;

Come to the communion rail with open hearts and open hands to receive His presence;

Open a way so that this Christmas

You and I may receive the gift that is above all gifts;

The gift of the presence and the grace of God in our lives;

And enjoy the merriest of Christmases;

And a life that is really life.

Merry Christmas.

Amen.