

Taking Attendance at the Manger

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
December 24, 2017—Christmas Eve

- Luke 2:1-20¹⁰ The angel said to them, “Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people.” (Good News Translation)
- Matthew 1:18-2:12²² Now all this happened in order to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet,²³ “A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel” (which means, “God is with us”). (Good News Translation)
- Theme: Christmas invites us to accept God's generous, forgiving love, for each of us is also a child of God: forgiven and accepted, dearly loved and absolutely precious.

Let us pray. *Be near us, Lord Jesus. We ask you to stay close by us forever and love us, we pray. Amen.*

The secular observance of Christmas in our society certainly has generated a diverse collection of characters.

- There's the bearded fellow in the red suit, of course.
- One of his little elfin helpers seems to make his way through houses on a shelf.
- There's a snowman who came to life one day.
- A levitating reindeer with a glowing red nose.
- A little drummer boy whose name we don't know but whose “rum-pa-pum-pum” we certainly do.
- A green, mean-spirited character with a heart “two sizes too small” who despised seeing joyful Christmas celebrations.
- We even see little bell-shaped pieces of chocolate ringing us their wish for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

What do they have in common? None of those figures have anything to do with the events we honor tonight.

The true story of Christmas comes not from Hollywood or Hallmark but from hallowed scripture. The Bible's account of the birth of Jesus has its own cast of characters. From memory let's “take attendance,” so to speak. Who was around that animal feed trough, that manger which served as the cradle for the infant Savior?

1. Well, of course there were Mary and Joseph, and the baby named Jesus.
2. Some shepherds came in to Bethlehem from the hillsides. Don't know if it was two shepherds, or five or a dozen or more; the Bible simply says “some shepherds.”¹
3. They had been directed there by angelic messengers from God. The Bible doesn't *say* that they made the trip with the shepherds, but since getting from place to place apparently wasn't a problem for angels, maybe they were there hovering somewhere nearby.
4. Some Wise Men from distant lands would find the Holy Family eventually, though probably not in time to see the baby sleeping in the manger. So we won't count them right now.
5. Since the Holy Family was in an animal pen or stable or cattle stall or shed, what about animals? What animals were present? Actually, the Bible doesn't mention any. We imagine

¹ Luke 2:8 Good News Translation

that Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem atop a donkey though the Bible doesn't say that, so perhaps a donkey was there. Would there be cows or goats or horses or sheep looking for their meal in the manger? Maybe. Probably. But again, they're not mentioned in the Bible so we don't know for sure.

6. What about the innkeeper? Would he (or she) be there? Again, perhaps, but if you check your Bible you might be surprised to notice that it never actually mentions an innkeeper. The scripture simply says that there was no space in the guestroom or inn. We assume that that disappointing news was conveyed to the expectant couple by someone, so perhaps there was an innkeeper checking up on the couple and their newborn. Maybe the innkeeping couple even summoned a midwife. But that's just speculation.
7. Finally, maybe some strangers heard the commotion or simply were passing by and looked in to see what was going on. There might have been some passers-by. But maybe not.

So with that review complete, let's take attendance:

Mary the mother. Joseph the father. Jesus the baby. Shepherds. Probably some animals. Perhaps an angelic presence. Maybe an innkeeper and spouse, or even some people who happened by that night. (Remember, the Wise Men came months later.)

But as we take attendance at the manger, realize that there's someone else present in this story. Someone we haven't mentioned yet. Someone vitally important to the story.

You. You're there. You are the audience for the story that Luke the gospel writer took the trouble to share. You are the reason Jesus was born into our world. You are the inspiration for God's choice to reach through the boundaries of time and space. You are the target for God's love—love which was put into flesh in the birth of a dear, precious, vulnerable baby born to a working-class guy and his young and inexperienced bride.

Jesus was born for me and for you. For each of you.

- For youngsters nodding off or squirming beside you.
- For seniors recalling memories of many Christmases ago.
- For newlyweds celebrating their first Christmas, and for couples who have seen twenty or forty or sixty Christmases.

God entered our world in Jesus to show God's love is for king and peasant, man and woman, grown-up and child, of any race, in every land. God loves us no matter whether we've accomplished lofty goals or experienced the sting of failure. God loves us no matter if we kept promises or disappointed someone very important to us. God loves the model citizen and the one with the checkered past. In coming among us in Jesus God announces, "You are loveable. I love you."

So, in addition to shepherds, and maybe some Bethlehem locals or visiting out-of-towners, you and I are Christmas witnesses. Through the testimony of sacred history passed down through the ages and shared across the entire globe we have seen God's love enter our world and enter our lives. The birth of Jesus offers new life to us. Christmas invites us to accept God's generous, forgiving love, for each of us is also a child of God: forgiven and accepted, dearly loved and absolutely precious.