

Christmas Eve – Early
December 24, 2016

E. Bevan Stanley

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger.” In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here we are gathered on Christmas Eve. We have just heard and seen the oh so familiar story once again. Let’s give it up for all those who gave so much of their time and energy to give us this gift.

Why does this story capture us? There are lots of stories about births. Often at family gatherings people share the adventures surrounding the births of their children. “It was the year of that enrollment thing, and we had to go back to Joe’s home town. The place was so full we couldn’t find a room anywhere. Wouldn’t you know it? That’s when Junior decided to be born. So we found this stable, and I went and had him right there. It was rather strange with all the animals watching, but it was kind of nice, too. And then we put him in a manger of all places.”

That part is interesting, but it could happen to anyone. Oddly, it is the shepherds who are the key to the whole thing. They are grubby lot. Nobody thinks much of shepherds. They are out on the hillside shivering in their thin cloaks. Suddenly an angel appears-- a bright, glittering presence. “Tonight your savior is born. Go and see. You can tell it is he because he will be the one lying in a manger.” That is crazy enough, but then the whole place was full of angels singing, “Glory to God in the highest and peace to God’s people on earth.” It’s hardly a silent night. As suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone. The shepherds looked at each other and said, “Did you see what I saw? Did you hear what I heard?” Then they say, “What to you say? Let’s go down to the town and take a look.”

And sure enough, they find the baby in the manger. And they tell anyone who will listen about their encounter with the angels and what they said about this baby. And the mother, Mary, pondered their story in her heart.

And then a few days later there are the unexpected visitors from far off places bringing gifts and stories of following a star to this place.

This baby is destined to be the Savior not only of his people, but of the entire world. This baby, we will learn, is in fact God come among us. This is the place where heaven and earth converge. This small stable contains something bigger than the whole world. Here in this stall Divinity has taken on human flesh. In this stable “the hopes and fears of all the years have met ...tonight.”¹ This is how our world is changed. God enters our world, and the place has never been the same since. In this moment we begin a new story for ourselves. In this stable our quest for heaven begins.

We give gifts on Christmas because this baby is the gift God gave us. You can't tell how big a gift is by the size of the package. In this small stable we receive the Gift of God in the baby. We receive Jesus, the Savior, the one who will break down every barrier that might keep us from coming to God or loving each other. We also receive the gift of God's own self. God comes to us in this baby. This child is the gift that starts it all. Like all the best gifts, this gift invites us into a new future. By receiving this gift our lives are changed.

God gives us what we need. God gives us hope. God gives us strength and fortitude to carry on. God gives us new gifts to begin new enterprises. God frees us from bonds of habit or fear. God gives us peace in the midst of our troubles. God gives us joy. God gives us

¹ Philips Brooks, Hymns #78 & 79.

the Savior. A baby. And although we don't see how that vulnerable, helpless bit of humanity can do us any good, nevertheless, every baby is a promise of a new future.

And that is the message of Christmas. God calls us into the future. Already the days are growing longer. We ponder the angels and the shepherds and Mary and Joseph. And we know, or we choose to believe, that the world is going to change. And everyone of us, young and old alike are called to be part of building this new world, what Jesus will call, when he is grown to be a man, the Kingdom of God.

Happy Christmas!