

## **Sermon for Christmas Eve 2010 – “It Really Happened”**

Text: Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

It had been a long, hard day on the road, and the two travelers were exhausted. It had been three days since they left Nazareth. Two more days and they would be in Bethlehem. For Mary's part, she just wished it was over. The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem was 100 miles through some of the most desolate country on earth. She, of course, was very pregnant and the baby wasn't going to wait much longer.

It'd all started not long ago when word came that the government needed some money. No big deal – the government always needed money. Only this time the word didn't come down from Herod in Jerusalem, but from Rome – from Emperor Caesar Augustus. Joseph knew his name but that was all. Like all good Jews, he had little use for Rome. But he's on the road now, because Caesar Augustus decided to take a census – from which he would get a list of names which would be used to collect taxes. With the money he raised, Augustus would build the mighty Roman Empire.

In any case, all over Israel families were traveling in the dead of winter to the places of their birth. Some to Hebron, some to Capernaum, many to Jerusalem. Joseph was taking his family to Bethlehem – a small village about six miles south of Jerusalem. A more out-of-the-way town could hardly be found in Judea.

It had only one claim to fame. A thousand years earlier, David – the greatest king Israel ever had – grew up there. If there'd been a Chamber of Commerce, they'd have put up a big billboard that read: “Welcome to Bethlehem – Home of King David.” But they didn't have to, because everyone knew. The prophets knew, including one named Micah, who'd predicted 700 years earlier, that the Messiah would one day be born there. So here they were – the two of them – trudging through the dust going back home. Mary rode a donkey because she was, as the saying goes, great with child.

Most of the journey passed through desolate wilderness. The road was crowded and nobody was very happy – including Joseph and Mary. Mary felt miserable and Joseph wasn't much help. He was tired, frustrated and discouraged. They'd planned to have the baby at home. But now Caesar had messed things up.

Another day passed and they were in Jericho. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem was particularly difficult and dangerous. Years later their son would tell a story about a man attacked by robbers and left for dead on that very road, so Joseph and Mary knew the risks. If there was any consolation, it was that they were almost there. Six more miles and they'd be in Bethlehem.

The next day, as they neared the village, they saw shepherds watching over their flocks of sheep. Finally, there it was – the little town of Bethlehem. It was good to be coming back home, but Joseph realized pretty quickly that things hadn't changed much. And it wasn't too long after they'd arrived, that Mary called out to Joseph, asking him if they could find someplace to stay for the night. Something in her voice made him turn and look at her. “Is it time?” he asked. She nodded silently. And so off they went to find the local inn – the baby making it pretty clear that he was coming soon, ready or not.

When they got to the inn, Mary waited outside. Joseph was inside for quite some time. When he finally came out, his head was bowed. There was no room for them. The man inside was

new – he didn't know Joseph, and they were extra-busy with everyone coming back to town for the census.

From the perspective of 2000 years, many people find it easy to criticize the innkeeper for turning Mary and Joseph away. But he wasn't necessarily mean or hardhearted. He was nothing more than a small town businessman who'd run out of rooms to rent. If he'd only known...but that's the whole point. He didn't know. Nobody in Bethlehem knew what was about to happen.

Now they were outside. The sun had fallen and the chilly night breeze cut through their robes. They were tired, hungry and a long way from home. Joseph was angry and Mary was in labor. They had to go somewhere. They couldn't stay here. There was one place they could go. The innkeeper did have a stable. "If you want to," he offered with a shrug, "you can stay there – no charge. It's all I have left." So they went to the stable. Actually, it was a little cave cut into the hillside behind the inn. There were rocks piled in rows with dirt, straw and manure all mixed together. But at least there was room to lie down, room to deliver the baby.

The pains were now coming faster and sharper. Mary lost all track of time, concentrating only on delivering her baby. Joseph was like any expectant father suddenly pressed into service. He was scared, nervous and excited. Not much help, really. She seemed to know just what to do. He mostly held her hand and wiped her forehead and waited.

All in all, this was not the way he had planned their first child. But no matter, from the very first this pregnancy had been different. The hours passed in the lonely stable. Finally, the moment had arrived. Mary cried out, straining with all her might, and fell back onto the blanket. Nothing. Then a tiny sound, a whimper, then a loud cry. It was a boy, a beautiful, healthy, brand-spanking-new baby boy. Joseph held up the baby for her to see. "Let me hold him," she said. And she did. There she lay for a moment. More than anything, she wanted to go to sleep. But before she did, she picked up a rough piece of cloth, tore it in strips, and wrapped the baby tightly. Then she looked for a place to put him. The only place she could find was a feeding trough—old, creaky, rough-hewn, with bits of food stuck to the bottom. It was perfect. She laid him there and then lay down to go to sleep.

Joseph didn't sleep just yet – he couldn't. Too much to think about. What a lucky man he was. He looked first at his wife – so tired and yet so beautiful – and then at the baby boy – surely the most beautiful baby ever born. Then he thought, how strange – yet how fitting – that it should all end up like this. It had happened just as the angel said it would – the one who had come to see Mary all those months ago. Maybe the angel was right – that nothing was impossible with God. Joseph didn't worry about naming the baby. The angel had taken care of that too. The angel had said to Mary, "Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." But the angel had also said, "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." How strange that it should happen to him – Joseph – just an ordinary carpenter...and to Mary – an innocent teenage girl. Who could figure it all out? Immanuel, the angel said, God with us. Mary, who had never known Joseph, now delivering her first child. **"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and shall bear a son."**

That's the way it was that first Christmas night over 2,000 years ago.

Baby sleeping, mother dreaming, father thinking, and God watching over it all. Mankind would never be the same.

It seems that these days, folks tend to take Christmas for granted. Political correctness would have us wish people “happy holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” So many would draw our attention away from the true reason we celebrate this holiday – this holyday – in the first place. They would reduce the story itself to a quaint little fairy tale, or fable. More than ever we need to reaffirm our basic faith in the truth that it really happened. These things are not legends or myths or holiday fairy tales. These things really happened.

When God decided to enter our world, he took a most unusual route. Born in poverty, to Jewish parents, in a forgotten village, in a stable. Unexpected and largely unnoticed, the Son of God came to us – became one of us – changing mankind forever. It really happened.

Because it really happened, our faith doesn't rest on vague speculations. No, it rests on sober historical fact. Let there be no doubt in anyone's mind whatsoever.

Joy to the World, the Lord is come. It's true not because we sing it, or because we say it, or even because we believe it. It's true not because our parents told us the story a long time ago. It's true because it really happened.

The question is: do we believe it?

I ask this, because if we say we believe it, then we have a choice. Knowing that it happened, believing it to be true – how will we respond? What will we do? What will we do with the Christ-child this Christmas? Will earth receive her King? Will every heart prepare him room? Or will we post a ‘no vacancy’ sign again this year? Will we sing with the angels, or stand by and remain silent? Will we go and see the baby in the manger, or will we be too busy? And if we go, what will we bring, what will we offer Him?

One final word. Many worry about the secular or cultural influence at Christmastime. We worry so much about all the emphasis on gifts and parties, and we wonder if all the talk about Santa Claus confuses our children. I would offer that truth is our best weapon against falsehood and confusion. So, let's take the message this year and go tell it on the mountain – over the hills and everywhere – that Jesus Christ is born. When people ask why this day is so special, let's tell them the truth. Could there ever be a better gift than the truth?

And so, using the words of the prophet Isaiah, let's tell them that “a child has been born for us, a son given to us.” Let's tell them that the good news that the angel brought to the shepherds is true – that unto us is born this day, a savior, Christ the Lord. Let's tell them that it really happened and that we believe it.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come, indeed. Those of us who've walked in darkness – have seen a great light. Those of us who've lived in a land of deep darkness – on us light has shined.

Thanks be to God. Amen.