

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The young lad trudged up the worn pathway  
that climbed into the hills above Bethlehem.

On his back he carried a large bundle.

It had been raining on and off all day  
and now that the sun was going down  
it looked like the rain was settling in for the night.

He had drawn the short straw,  
and so got to make the trip into town  
to get the needed food and supplies for the other shepherds.

The shepherds were pretty good at living off the land,  
but there were still some things that you just needed to go into town to get.

It used to be a treat to go into town,  
that's why they drew lots.

If it had been a chore, then he,  
as the youngest of the shepherds in their little community in the hills,  
would have been the designated errand runner.

It used to be a treat, but it wasn't a treat any more.

They wouldn't be drawing lots next week.

The soldiers had come to town.



Have you ever wondered  
why God chose to send his Son into the world  
in first Century Palestine to a subjugated people  
in a land occupied by a foreign army,  
born to an unwed mother in a society  
where unwed motherhood was at worst a capital offense,

and at best a crime that ostracized both mother and child.

It sure looks at the beginning of the story

like this is one great big set-up for failure.

You'd think God would take better care of his Son,

since he is going to be the redeemer of the world.

\* \* \* \* \*

The lad hitched the bundle up higher on his back and grunted with the pain.

The bruises on his back were probably dark purple by now

and the cuts on his neck and ear smarted a bit,

but the cool water of the rain helped with the pain.

It really was just a simple mistake,

but he had paid a high price.

Actually, he felt lucky.

While he had been in town,

running through the crowds on the way to the inn to get the supplies,

he had had the misfortune to bump into a soldier in the crowded street.

That would have been bad enough,

but the soldier lost his footing and fell into the muddy street.

As the soldier picked himself up from the ground,

purple faced with embarrassment,

his comrades laughed at his clumsiness.

Still, it might have ended there,

but many of the townspeople joined in with the laughter.

That was more than the soldiers pride could take.

“Why you little sneak-thief!

I’ll show you not to try and cut my purse!”

he bellowed as he cuffed the lad behind the ear,

knocking him down to the ground.

He kicked him a few times in the back for good measure,

as the lad curled up in a ball in an effort to protect himself.  
As the soldier drew his sword,  
one of his comrades grabbed his arm and said,  
“That’s enough. It’s just a boy. Let him be.  
We’ve got other duties to attend to.”  
The lad could still remember the burning look of death  
in the eyes of the soldier as he harumphed,  
slammed the sword back in its sheath,  
and turned to stomp away.

It would be a long time before he slept well, the lad thought,  
as he trudged further up the path,  
and it got darker as thunder rumbled through the hills.

\* \* \* \* \*

There must have been a reason that God chose the time and place that he did.  
There must have been something special about that time and place, mustn’t there?  
But what if there wasn’t something special.  
What if it didn’t really matter after all.  
What if the story of the incarnation is more than a history story.  
More than just a tale about an event that happened long ago.  
What if the story is special,  
not because it was such a unique onetime event over two thousand years ago,  
but because it is such a universal truth,  
an event that happens to us all the time,  
even in the midst of all our everyday activities.

What if that is the real story of Christmas;  
that God truly is in the world with us,  
not just once long ago, but all the time.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was getting dark fast.

If he wanted to find the camp before it got full dark  
he would need to hurry.

He picked up the pace,

as his mind wandered back through the events of the day.

As soon as the soldiers had left, he got up out of the mud.

Nobody in the small crowd moved to help him.

They looked at him warily.

The lad scanned the surrounding crowd,  
but saw no familiar faces.

He wanted to cry, but he wanted to be brave too.

“I’m not a thief,” he shouted, “I’m a shepherd!”  
as he ran off toward the inn.

When Tobias, the old innkeeper saw the lad he whistled,

“Will you look what the cat dragged in, and I do mean dragged.  
What happened to you, lad?”

The young shepherd began relating his story,  
but before he could get very far along,  
more people came in wanting rooms.

“You sit over there while I get what you need,  
and something for that ear as well,”

Old Toby said as he ran off with his new customers.

It was a while before he returned

with the supplies all trussed up in a sack to carry.

“Well,” he said, handing over the sack,  
“I’m all full up now.

I’ve even got a small family staying in the back hallway.

I’ll be glad when this census is over  
and I can get back to normal.

It’s such a bother.

Here let me put this on that ear.”

As he rubbed a dark salve on the cut

another man walked in looking for a room.

Old Toby told him he was out of rooms,

but the man pleaded with him.

“Please sir, my wife is pregnant.”

Tobias sighed.

The shepherd lad looked up at the innkeepers face as he said,

“Well, I suppose you could bed down for the night in the stable.

It isn’t much, but it’s dry.

A room may open up tomorrow.”

The boy thought how different the innkeepers face looked

from the soldiers face he had seen earlier in the day.

Old Toby turned and looked down at the shepherd boy

and said, “You best be on your way

if your going to be back to camp by nightfall.

It looks like it’s going to be a wild night.

I’ve got to get these folks settled in.”

As Toby walked out the back door, he shouted over his shoulder,

“The missus gave you an extra loaf for your troubles.

You steer clear of those soldiers from now on, y’hear?”

As the young shepherd scooted out into the street

he noticed the young pregnant woman waiting on her donkey.

Even through the traveling cloak

he could see that she was very pregnant.

\* \* \* \* \*

So, if the real story of Christmas

is that God is with us now,

is alive in the world now,

how do we miss it?

Why is God so hard to see?

Well, if this story in the Bible is a universal story  
it should help us answer that question as well.

And it does.

How does the Word incarnate,  
the Savior of the world,  
come to us?

As a helpless child.

God's saving power comes to us in a fragile package.

The true power of God is manifested to the world  
in staggering powerlessness.

It seems to make no sense,  
at least to the powerful.

How can true power be powerlessness?

Let's look closer.

Who are the ones who know the true meaning  
of the child born in Bethlehem?

An un-wed mother,  
a group of shepherds,  
and wise men from the East.

They are all outsiders,  
either by order, by circumstance, or by chance.

Outsiders.

\* \* \* \* \*

The shepherd lad arrived at the camp at about the same time as the storm.

It was now full dark.

Many of the sheep were huddled into a low spot  
in the hillside near the camp.

He could see them by the light of the occasional flash of lightening.

His brother shepherds were huddled in a lean-to trying to stay dry.

A little fire was trying to hold its own against the rain.

It looked like a losing battle.

As the lad arrived the other shepherds fell on the pack examining its contents.

They found the wineskin and passed it around,

along with the loaf of bread,

to help cut the chill in the air.

It was a while before anyone noticed the ugly cut on the lads ear.

As he related the encounter with the soldier

the shepherds sat quietly, eyes glancing sideways,

suddenly more afraid.

Afraid that soldiers might appear out of the darkness.

Thunder rumbled through the hills.

Then a bolt of lightening struck the hillside in front of them,

its blinding white light dazzling them.

The instantaneous crash of thunder stunned them

and they all dropped to the ground,

hugging the earth in shock and fear.

But for some reason the brilliant light didn't fade.

The lad looked up and saw standing in front of them

a man dressed in brilliant white,

or was it a woman, he couldn't tell.

His ears were still ringing from the thunder

and he was very confused,

but then he heard him, or her, or whatever it was say,

“Do not be afraid; for see—

I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,

who is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign for you:

you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It is startling how often I bump into the Son of God,  
how often I suddenly find myself in the presence of God.

Once you get the hang of looking,  
the world is shot full of the presence of God.

You can find God in the twinkle of light  
off the ripples in a northwoods lake  
or the twinkle in the eye of a child on Christmas;  
the sigh of newlyweds lying contented in each others arms,  
or the sigh of the last breath of a woman dying of cancer;  
the tears of joy at the birth of a child,  
or the tears of pain when we are helpless to protect those we love  
from the dangers of the world.

It is in those moments when we feel most powerless and outside the pale,  
that God comes to us in particularly powerful ways.

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It must be an angel, the young shepherd thought.  
Behind the angel lightening danced across the sky and the clouds.  
And the ringing in his ears gave way to music,  
the most beautiful music he had ever heard.

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”  
Just as he was getting used to what he was seeing and hearing,  
before he could even think to ask a question of the strange visitor,  
they were plunged into darkness,  
and heard again only the rumble of thunder in the hills.



The little fire was only a steaming pile of damp ash.

As the small group of shepherds picked themselves up off the ground  
no one spoke.

They glanced back and forth at each other,  
unasked questions in their eyes.

They knew they would never be the same again.

Finally the oldest shepherd,

their leader, such as it was,

said, "Soldiers or no, we must go into town to see this,  
to see if it is true."

One of the other shepherds replied, "How will we know where to go?

We can't search the whole town!"

As he stood in the dark,

the face of the young woman on the donkey flashed in his mind,  
and he knew.

The young shepherd lad,

whose name happened to be Aaron, spoke up

and said, "I know where he is. I can show you. Follow me."

And he walked into the night

and he wasn't afraid anymore.

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We have a gift to share.

We know something nobody else knows.

We know the secret of salvation.

We know where God can be found.

Like all great truths it is startlingly easy to learn,

and startlingly difficult to remember.

God is with us.

Always.

Even on the darkest night,  
in the darkest places in our lives,  
we are never alone, never unloved.

We really do have nothing to fear,  
God is with us.

That is what we learn again each Christmas  
and what we struggle to remember all the rest of the year.

Emmanuel. God is with us.

Always.

And that is enough.

Amen.