

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

I'd like to tell you a little story

about a man from the Gospel story we heard tonight.

He isn't one of the better known characters.

In fact he isn't even mentioned by name or title.

But he was there.

Take my word for it.

This story starts a long time ago,

many years before Jesus was born.

Back then this man was just a boy

and he was a very good boy

who went to the synagogue with his parents every week.

When he was at the synagogue

he heard these wonderful stories

about the messiah who was coming to save his people.

They were his favorite stories from scripture,

and he got very excited about them,

and so he was always searching around his town

looking for the messiah.

He would ask everyone he knew if they had seen the messiah.

But no one had seen him.

Well, time went by as it always does,

and this good boy slowly grew up to be a good man.

And still he asked everyone he met if they had seen the messiah.

He lived in a little town on the side of a hill called Bethlehem.

There was only one road that went through the town at that time,

and so this good man decided that he would build a little inn in the town

right on the road.

That way he could talk to all the travelers that would pass through the town
and ask them if they had seen the messiah.

Day after day the man would ask the travelers,
and day after day he would get the same answer.

No one had seen the messiah.

More time passed
and the man grew to be an old man.

As the town grew, other roads were built, and other inns were built,
but his was still the nicest inn on the biggest road in town.

Then one day an order came from the Emperor
that everyone was to go to their own home town to be counted.

In a matter of days his town was full of people
and everyone needed a place to stay.

The old man's inn was full of people.

He was very busy.

He put extra beds in every room and still there were too many people.

One night after a very busy day,
when all his guests had finally gone to bed,
he sat outside the front door of his inn
and had a cup of wine before he went to bed.

He liked to sit in the peace and quiet of the night
after a long day of running around helping his guests.

He had to turn away three different couples today because all his rooms were full.

As he looked up at the stars he noticed one that was very bright.

In the quiet of the night he heard a baby crying.

It seemed to be coming from a stable down the street.

It reminded him of something,
but his tired mind couldn't remember what it was.

He finished his wine and went to bed.

It was days later that some shepherds stopped at the inn
and told the Old Man of their vision of angels
and their visit to the stable.

The old man heard the story and remembered the baby crying in the night.
He ran from the inn all the way down the street to the stable, but it was empty.
The family had moved on.

The old cow that was munching from the manger
lifted her head and looked at him with sad eyes.

The old man started to cry
because he had missed the chance to see the messiah,
even though he was just a baby.

And he was heartsick
because he realized he must have turned the messiah's mother and father away
from his door.

From his inn.

He tried to remember the faces of all the people he had turned away,
but there were too many.

If he had only known,
had only been paying attention,
the messiah could have been born in his very own inn.

What a joy that would have been,
the joy he had been waiting for his whole life.

And he had been that close!

In the midst of his sadness,
standing in that barn next to a cow contentedly munching away,
that good old man had a sudden flash of joy
as he realized that his long wait was over at last.

The messiah had come.

Every year we remember the story of the birth of Jesus,
the wonderful mystery of the creator of the universe breaking into our world
and living here as one of us.

But far too often we remember it only as an event that happened in the distant past,
at a safe distance.

We forget that the mystery of the incarnation means
that God is right here, right now.

And we also forget that though God is breaking into our lives constantly,
it isn't always obvious.

If we are not paying attention we can and will miss it.

Among so many other gifts,
God has given us the ability to ignore our creator,
an ability we have sadly developed into a high art form.

Yet still, God continues to shower us with gifts,
continues to love us.

Again and again, in countless ways,
God is born into our lives,
but rarely do we even make it to the manger.

For most of us,
the Christmas season has become a time of crushing expectations
as we single handedly try to make heaven on earth.

Finances are pushed to the limit,
so too the resources of time
as we try to cram every activity we can
into these precious weeks between Thanksgiving and New Years.

The holiday season may be a time of joy,
but it is also for many a time of great stress and depression,
even more so as we make our way through the pandemic.

Statistics tell me that as many as 15% of the people in church here tonight

have toyed with the idea of suicide during this holiday season.

The darkness indeed gathers around us.

In the face of this darkness we try to make everything perfect,

if only for one night,

forgetting that perfection is reserved for God.

We forget that we don't need to be God,

we need only love God.

Tonight we remember that God is with us,

is still with us.

With us here.

With us now.

Our long wait is over.

With all of our divisions and shortcomings;

with all of our faults and failings;

The messiah has come.

Christ resides in each of us,

waiting for the right moment to shine forth.

Tonight is one such moment.

Look around you.

The stars are out tonight.

The light of Christ is shining in the eyes of the people around you.

Don't let it pass.

Don't miss it.

Not tonight.

For a whole host of reasons,

you may not be able to see it tomorrow,

but see it tonight.

And tomorrow do your best to remember.

Remember that it was there and is still there.

Remember that it really is there all the time,
even when you can't see it,

blazing like the sun behind even the darkest of clouds.

“For 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 the child wrapped in bands of cloth
and lying in a manger.”

Amen.