

**Message Delivered at Christ Church
Christmas Eve; 1:30 PM Worship Service
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson**

Merry Christmas, everybody! It's a good time to be together! And aren't we a fortunate people to have all these young persons leading worship today? Yes, we are...

Now kids, I want to ask you some questions...and you're sitting there and I'm standing up here, and you just shout out the answers because you all know them; these are pretty easy questions...

So what are we celebrating today?

That's right...Christmas!

And on Christmas, we're celebrating someone's birthday. Whose birthday is it?

Jesus' birthday! Well done!

And when somebody has a birthday...like Jesus, or like you...what do we do? We usually have a big...

...Party! Yes, we do!

So today, coming together like this, this is our big party for Jesus.

You see, a long time ago there was a woman named Mary and a man named Joseph. And Mary was expecting a baby, just like at some point your mom expected you. Now a man named Augustus, who was in charge of the Roman Empire, decided that he needed to know how many people lived in the Empire and where they lived. So he made Mary and Joseph go to a town called Bethlehem...which is where Joseph's family was from...to get signed up.

And I imagine it was a pretty difficult trip, because Mary was ready to have a baby and that's a long way to travel when you're ready to have a baby.

And when they got there, they had a problem...anybody remember the problem they had? Right, there was no place for them to stay. There was no room for them in the inn. So they had to stay outside...probably in a stable. And that's where Jesus was born.

Now, when you were born, your mom and dad put you in a crib. That's a little bed that babies sleep in...you know all that. But there were no cribs in the stable, so Mary wrapped Jesus up nice and tight in blankets—because babies love to be wrapped up nice and tight—and put him in a trough that animals eat out of called a manger, where he could sleep.

Now that's not a real easy way to be born...away from home, in a stable, and sleeping in a manger.

But we all know that Jesus is God...right? And he is born this way...this kind of difficult way...so that we always know that God is always with us, no matter what, and even when things are difficult; and that God always loves us, no matter what, and even when things are difficult.

You see, we do all sorts of things at Christmas, right? Raise your hand if you've sung a Christmas song at all over the last little while...raise your hand if you decorated a Christmas tree...raise your hand if you've eaten a Christmas cookie...raise your hand if you've had a Christmas party at school, or at home, or at a friend's house...raise your hand if there are going to be Christmas presents to open! All those things are things we do at Christmas. And they're all fun, aren't they...

And we do all these things to remember that Jesus is born, and that he is with you all the time. All the time, Jesus is with you...in front of you, behind you, above you, below you, in people you meet, and inside you.

So, we're going to play a little game...I'm going to say some things, and when I point to you I want you to say "Jesus is with me..." Are you ready?

When I am awake, and when I am asleep...*Jesus is with me...*

When I am playing, and when I am doing my chores...*Jesus is with me...*

When I am sad, and when I am happy...*Jesus is with me...*

When I am afraid, and when I feel good...*Jesus is with me...*

When I am crying, and when I am laughing...*Jesus is with me...*

All the time. God is always right there with you; because at Christmas, when Jesus is born, God comes to us. And he never leaves.

Because he loves you. All the time, he loves you. All the time, he is with you and he loves you. He is here in church; he is with you in school; he is there in your home; and he is right here in your heart, all the time. All the time...*Jesus is with me...*

And when we throw Jesus a big birthday party, like we're doing right now...that's what we're celebrating...that Jesus loves you always; Jesus is with you always; and Jesus is born not just in Bethlehem, but right in your own heart.

So here's a Christmas prayer I want to teach you, and we're going to practice it...

It goes like this: "*Jesus, my heart is your home.*"

Say it with me..."*Jesus, my heart is your home.*"

Amen.

Moms and Dads and Grandmas and Grandpas...you've given your kids and grandkids all sorts of things this Christmas season. Today, and tomorrow, and beyond tomorrow, give them that prayer. Say it with them tonight before they go to bed, and say it tomorrow morning before they open presents; and then say it again tomorrow night, and the next morning. It's real easy; you've already got it memorized..."*Jesus, my heart is your home.*" Say it with them, and help it find a place in their soul so that they say it when you're not around to say it with them...like when their thirty. Keep saying it, keep praying it, and make every day Christmas Day...because we want them to know this truth—for it is absolutely true—for the rest of their lives, and we want you to know it for the rest of your lives, too...Jesus is born, and makes his home not in Bethlehem, but in your heart...this day, and tomorrow, and always, and forever.

Merry Christmas, everybody.

Message Delivered at Christ Church

Christmas Eve; 4:00 PM and 6:30 PM

TEXTS: John 1:1-4, 12-14, 16; Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Luke 2:1-20

Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Two Jewish peasants...who nobody in authority would have noticed...once made a journey. They were from a small town called Nazareth that no one paid attention to and went to another small town called Bethlehem...a town which certainly meant something great to the Hebrew people, but which meant little to anyone else.

They don't make the journey because they want to, of course. No very pregnant woman would actually choose to travel two days by donkey; or worse, by foot. Nine months pregnant is nesting time, not travel time.

They're making the journey because they have to. The authorities of a kingdom very different from the Kingdom of God use the power they have to force these two people to leave behind what they know and go to a faraway place where they know no one; a place where they are strangers among strangers, and bereft of any solace the familiar might provide.

When they get there, there's no room in the inn. So this baby is born outside...out where everybody else is. Not behind four walls, but smack dab in the middle of the neighborhood. In the ancient world...as in developing nations today...life was lived not inside, but outside...under the sun and stars, with everyone milling about and strangers and friends bumping into one another. So it is outside the inn--where daily life happens; where everyone else is born and does what they do to make life work; that the Savior arrives.

And so it is not a surprise that those outside...on the fringes...are the first to hear the news. Not princes; not generals; not rabbis; not priests...but shepherds. Not in Caesar's palace; not in the Temple; and not in the synagogue, but in the fields, right where they are, in the middle of a workday. To be a shepherd was a noble calling...King David had been one; and, of course, "the Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." But let's be clear here...shepherds got to watch sheep...that's what they do...it's a 24/7 kind of job. There are a lot of things you can't be too precious about if you're a shepherd...you work even on the Sabbath, you eat what you can, your hands don't get washed very often, and you ain't always going to make it to the synagogue because...well...somebody's got to watch the sheep or else there ain't gonna be no sheep no more...

It's to them the angels tell the secret...that to them...a Savior is born, who promises the peace on earth we so deeply desire but have never been able to achieve for ourselves. Note that the angel does not say to them "A Savior has been born to Mary," but says "to you...to you...is born this day in the city of David a Savior..." To you...

So let me ask you...when was the last time you ran...literally ran...because there was something so urgent in your life that it seemed your life depended on it? And I'm talking about the truly urgent, where if you didn't get there in time something in your life would be lost?

Because that's what the shepherds do. They leave it all behind...I guess, even the sheep...to see at the manger with their own eyes. They race, as if getting there is the only thing that matters. The word translated as "haste" means something like to "put under foot," as in "cover some territory." Their pedal is to the metal; they're putting miles behind them, fast.

And then, they talk. They talk, and they talk, and they talk. You ever been around someone who just doesn't know when to stifle it? Who just can't seem to recognize the rules of polite society and just let there be a little peace and quiet? "This is childbirth, you guys! They are all exhausted! Give 'em a break, and just be quiet!" Well, they just can't keep their mouths shut.

Sometimes there are things so miraculous, we just can't keep in mind what's proper...angels, and a Savior born the way we were born...naked, defenseless, tiny, and dependent, the way they were; resting in the arms of his mother the same way they rested in the arms of their mothers...not behind the shuttered windows of an inn, but right out in the open, where everybody can see...even dirty old shepherds.

Sometimes, there's stuff you just can't keep quiet. Mother Mary can stay quiet, but not them.

That's the story...the one we've been waiting to hear again...so simple.

It's a story, you'll notice, that takes place on the fringes of life...not at the centers of power; not with famous people; not among the washed, and clean, or even particularly religious. It's two peasants, not Kate and William; it's Nazareth and Bethlehem, not New York and LA; it's shepherds, not scripture reading rabbis or well-mannered philosophers; it's an everyday street and a common enough stable, not an inn or a synagogue...where the Savior is born.

It's at the edge of the circle of life this whole story happens. It's at the "far out" Jesus arrives...maybe, I would suggest, so that we know that if he can arrive in Bethlehem, in a manger, to these peasants and shepherds who dance around the outside of all the world says matters...he can arrive to anyone, anywhere...including you; and me...right where we are. The Creating Word of God arrives; becomes flesh; and pitches his tent not somewhere else, but among us. He moves into your neighborhood and my neighborhood because every neighborhood is within his realm, and within his desire to claim it, and you, and me...so great is God's love, and so deep his yearning that we come to the manger...

We're in the sanctuary now; and as it is every time we're here, we're all bringing our stuff. If you are here for the first time, please know that Christ Church is just a bunch of broken people convinced of God's healing love, and doing the best we can to live faithfully and rightly. We just bring it all to the table; bring ourselves to the manger tonight; bring who we are and what we've been given, and place it before the Lord who desires us so much he came to us first. We bring our hopes and dreams for a better life to the God who smiles every time we come to him. If you're searching for a people living this simple kind of life, you're in the right place.

But there is more tonight. The promise of Christmas is greater than a better life, or a solution to one of our problems. The promise is the coming of God's favor to all that is; the light that never darkens; a new life richer, and more abundant than all the possessions in the world; the declaration that the powers that enslave humanity have lost their power; and the hope, as someone wiser than me has written, that humanity is destined not just for improvement but for restoration and resurrection. He arrives on the fringes not because his promise is to make a few corrections here and there, and then leave us to our own devices. He arrives on the fringes because revolution always happens from the outside in, and because tonight the world is given a new Kingdom of righteousness, and justice, and mercy, and peace.

He arrives to peasants and shepherds so that we know he arrives to us; that whatever it is you carry this evening...grief, or disappointment, or fear, or one of those hidden joys you just haven't told anybody yet...whatever it is that is silent or secret...that in the midst of all that stuff, the beautiful, and loving, and merciful, and gentle Lord sets up shop, and doesn't leave. If no one has told you this, let me say it clear. Because of Christmas, God is decidedly on your side, and the universe is friendly, and your very existence...just because it is...is made holy and sacred because God comes, wherever we are, whatever our situation. In that deep part, so far from our center that we aren't even sure what's there, God is present, and the Lord ain't going anywhere...

And he comes and pitches his tent to bring a whole new world. Just consider some of the outrageous things the scriptures say tonight...that it is peace God promises; that the Kingdom of righteousness and justice prevails; and that great joy is destined for all people...not fear, not worry, not want for all people...but joy. They are outrageous proclamations that many believe are impossible, but that we believe are inevitable...because of this baby, and God made flesh. Because of tonight there is hope, and this hope will not be squelched by darkness.

The world is still a tough place. Still too much woundedness. Still, too much pain, and poverty, and war, and hunger. Humanity, on its own, is frightfully consistent. And into all that God comes, and stays, and gets busy, and makes new...because of the greatness of God's love, and what we celebrate this night.

So tonight we hope. We hold forth the deep meaning of this story. We see ourselves in it, live it ourselves, and share it...that the world—and where you live—is the place where God's love is already at work; that restoration and healing is what our Creator brings and intends for all that is; that the light shines, salvation has come, and “fear not” are a couple of pretty good angelic words to remember. And all these things I just said are true because of this baby born; and the Word made flesh, dwelling among all humanity...who comes not just to make life better, but to make the world new...right now.

A blessed Christmas to you, everybody. The Lord has come to exactly where you are, and he ain't leaving. We can't be so far out there that Jesus won't arrive. He always has, and he always does. That's why Christmas always keeps coming. The Word is made flesh; he has moved into the neighborhood and pitched his tent in every corner of the world; and one more time...because of this baby...God's promises are fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God arrives, and the Good News of Peace and Salvation gets told on the mountain...by the angels, by the shepherds, and by us.

Message Delivered at Christ Church
Christmas Eve; 9:30 PM Worship Service
TEXTS: Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-18
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Flip a switch in your automobile tonight, or when you get home this evening, and the lights will come on. It's quiet outside at 11:00 PM on a Christmas Eve, but the lights on the storefronts and even a few street lamps will illuminate your way from this sanctuary to your next destination.

Easy access to artificial light is a benchmark of developed nations. Until a hundred years ago, it took a whole lot more effort for there to be light in the midst of darkness. Travel to a developing nation today...where electric power is so less dependable...and among the many things you'll notice is just how dark the night can be. Sometimes, when there's no moon, it's a darkness so thick you can feel it; where the next step is treacherous because you truly can't see where you're going; and where sounds take on greater power because you don't know whether what's creating them is friend or foe.

In the West, we've demystified light; studied it; we have at least an incomplete idea of what it's comprised of. And by the flick of a switch, we have access to it. And so, maybe, we've lost some of our appreciation for how powerful it is, and how deeply it matters.

When John decided to write his gospel, he decided to use images earthy and fundamental to convey who Jesus is. We need water and food to survive, so Jesus is the living water and the bread of life. We need protection from the powers that would harm us, so Jesus is both the Gate to the Sheepfold and the Good Shepherd. But before all those things, we need light. Turn out the lights, and everything else stops.

And so late on a Christmas Eve, we sit for a bit and contemplate the light of the world coming among us; the Creating Word of God--the first action of which was to separate the light from the darkness--made flesh, and dwelling among us; pitching his tent in our neighborhoods and homes, and setting up shop in our lives. The light of the world, who invites us to truth, and love, and compassion, and mercy; who treasures us more deeply than we can imagine; who knows us better than we know ourselves; and who sees in us more than we see ourselves...coming to rest, right here and where we find ourselves next.

There is a peculiar fact about light, one that we tend to overlook. Light, in and of itself, is invisible. We can see what generates the rays of light...this evening, the candles and the ceiling bulbs...but light, itself, is something we can't see. The only way we really know it's there is by what it shines upon; by the affect it has on other objects. If there was nothing for the light to shine on, we'd hardly know it existed.

So we've been our different places today; maybe been finishing some shopping, maybe spent the day with family and friends; in some way, luxuriated in the beauty of Christmas Eve...exactly what we are intended to do.

And now we gather in the darkness of this night...just about the longest night of the year. And we remember that it's a different night than any other; that in the hushed quiet of a stable the baby was born; came into the world the same way each of us did...naked, and tiny, and dependent...that the God of all creation decides to arrive the same way each of us arrived; and that now there is a light in the world that will not be vanquished...a soft light, a gentle light, like the light of a candle...a light that brings warmth, not harshness...where it is safe...even, a light we can gaze upon without going blind.

A light that shines in the world; that the darkness cannot overcome; that shines upon us; and of whom we are the reflection. The Light comes into the world, and it never stops shining, and it reflects off us. It shines on its own; but we, too, reveal that it is in the world. The light comes not to keep to itself, but to bring its brightness and life to all that is.

I hope it is a most blessed Christmas for you. I invite you to rest a bit, to enjoy the light, to be still and let its warmth soothe your soul, let the gentle baby rest in your arms and cast any sorrows or worries you may have upon him. He's a strong and able child, fully capable of bringing salvation to the entire world.

And know also that this light shines through you. In every act of grace; every bit of kindness; every decision for mercy rather than judgment; every tear shed for those who suffer; every bit of discomfort that comes when life is lived in shallowness...in all those moments and more, this light reflects off you and reveals the One who comes this evening. Light brings warmth, but it also brings power. Remember...when he grows up, the one we call the Light of the World will say to us "So let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

So for a moment, simply rest in this gentle light...that reminds us that in the quiet of Bethlehem the light of the world made a home; and in the quiet of this night in Short Pump, some 2000 years later, he also makes a home in you.