

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
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## Christmas Eve Meditation

The beautiful thing about the stories of scripture, and the Christmas story in particular,  
is that they are living stories.

They are living stories because they are timeless -  
they speak to us again and again, year after year.

The characters find their way into our changing circumstances  
so that no matter where we may be, or what situations we may be facing,  
God finds a way, through this story, to enter into our reality.

Through this story God shines the holy light of heaven  
into our world and illuminates our lives.

Sometimes the light God shines can be harsh, even blinding,  
but the light of this night is not that way.

The light of Christmas Eve is a gentle light, a beckoning light,  
a glowing light that warms us,  
that invites us to re-imagine who we are  
and who we can be when we realize that God is with us.

In the early service with the children  
we talked about the great difficulty of the journey to Bethlehem,  
and the hardship Mary and Joseph had to endure -  
we even took our own little journey around the sanctuary,  
with thirty-something children!

The hardship of the Holy Family's journey  
is perhaps the most likely place for us to enter the story.

Imagine, if you can - and I'm sure you can -  
that you are faced with some *unpleasant necessity*,  
not of your own choosing,  
but a necessity that has been thrust upon you by life.

Are you dealing with anything like that right now?

And though you may not have chosen this obstacle  
it stands in your way nonetheless and presents you with a choice,  
or a number of choices.

You can run away from it, try to ignore it, complain about it, lose sleep over it.  
But at some point you have to act, you have to speak, you have to reckon.  
How will you respond?

Mary had a choice to accept her vocation, or not to.  
She had questions - big questions  
about how all these things announced by the angel could possibly be.

But when it came time to choose, she chose to respond in faith:  
*Here I am, the servant of the Lord.*  
*Let it be with me according to your word.*

Is that a prayer you are able to make to God about your life?  
What might that mean for you - today? tonight?  
This is not the time to say  
“If only it weren’t like this.  
If things could just be different in this way or that.  
If so-and-so would just stop doing this, or start doing that.  
If I had some other choice.”

Mary didn’t complain,  
“If only God could have waited a few months  
until Joseph and I were already married,  
he could have saved us a lot of trouble.”  
“If only the Emperor hadn’t called for that census!”

Take a look at your situation right now: your relationships, your family, your work;  
what could it mean for you to say to God,  
*Here I am, the servant of the Lord.*  
*Let it be with me according to your word.*

The question is not “what would be the easiest way out?”  
but “what would best serve the Lord?”  
There were easier ways out for Joseph, and probably even for Mary.  
But they chose to serve the Lord.

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Or perhaps yours is a different questions - a question of vocation.  
How is your life’s work significant for the world and the kingdom of God?  
Why do you do what you do, day in and day out?  
Does any of your daily grind really matter to God, or for God’s purposes?

This is a question that must surely have come to the minds of the Shepherds,  
as they wandered the fields, day and night,  
watching over their flocks.  
To our sentimental modern minds,  
being a shepherd wandering the countryside  
could sound idyllic and peaceful, maybe,  
but actually it was a harsh, smelly, monotonous business.

There is a reason we call them the “lowly” shepherds.  
Shepherds were among the lowest classes of society.  
It is not surprising that the story of the shepherds shows up in the Gospel of Luke,  
since Luke emphasizes the good news for the least, the last, and the lost.

Of all people to whom God could have sent the angels,  
why would he choose these shepherds?  
And who would listen to them anyway?  
What use could God possibly have for them?  
More than they could possibly imagine, apparently.  
For an Angel of the Lord did appear to them and sent them straight to Bethlehem  
to see what God was doing there; to meet the Child called Immanuel.  
God's plan somehow managed to include these nobodies.

You know the Christmas carol, *Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow?*  
*There's a star in the East on Christmas morn,*  
*Rise up, shepherd, and follow,*  
*It will lead to the place where the Christ was born,*  
*Rise up, shepherd, and follow.*

It's a great song but in the second verse it gets the story wrong  
on a very important point.

The second verse goes  
*If you take good heed to the angel's words...*  
*... You'll forget your flocks, you'll forget your herds,*

But the gospel says they went to Bethlehem to see the Christ child,  
but then that they *returned*.  
*The shepherds returned,*  
*glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen,*  
*as it had been told them.*

That is important for us. The shepherds re-entered their world, changed.  
They re-entered their work, their vocation, the lowly, smelly, boring business  
of tending sheep.

But they were changed, and they told people about why their were changed;  
and some of the people they told were amazed,  
so amazed that their lives changed, too.

How does the presence of Immanuel, God-with-us, change your vocation?  
When you return from this night, and from the gift of tomorrow,  
return to your regular work,  
you will be in much the same circumstance as the shepherds  
when they returned to their flocks.

What will be different? What will this good news mean for you  
upon your return?

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Now we haven't read about the Wise Men from the East tonight.  
That reading doesn't actually come until Epiphany;

and according to Matthew, this visit didn't happen until later.  
In the story, the Wise Men do not enter a stable to give their gifts,  
but into the house of Mary and Joseph.  
So the tradition takes a little creative license  
by including the Magi in the manger scene,  
but there is really no harm in it  
since the point of the Gospel story is not  
to present a simple, chronological record of historical facts.

The point is in the *meaning* of these events:  
that the wise people who seek truth  
from far and wide recognize the birth of Jesus  
as a matter of great importance.

These masters of the ancient astrology  
are known for being able to read the stars and predict the rise and fall of kings,  
and to recognize and interpret the significance of great events.

For us today, in a pluralist society, in which many religions are practiced around us,  
where we are able to witness a whole world of traditions  
at the click of a button, or a brief flight on a plane,  
to hear that the birth of a little boy to a poor Jewish family  
could have significance that is recognized  
by the great seers of the Greco-Roman world,  
should come as important news.

There was something compelling about the birth of Jesus  
that drew the attention of non-Jewish spiritual leaders.

But perhaps even more to the point for us  
is the action taken by these wise men.

They went out of their way - far out of their way -  
to bring gifts to the king.

They gave up their treasure for this child who was born in Bethlehem.

In his presence they were wise enough to know that  
our earthly treasures belong to God  
and that we need to make room in our lives  
for the heavenly treasure God offers.

Our relationship to status, and to wealth, and to beautiful material things,  
is brought front and center in this story of the wise men.

What do the gifts of these Wise Men mean for you this Christmas?

What earthly treasures are you grasping  
that you need to let go  
in order to free up your hands and your heart  
to worship and receive the Christ-child?

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For many of us, Christmas is a time of mixed emotions.  
We may feel the good cheer and the generous Spirit of the season.  
We may just feel stressed out.  
We may lament at the blatant removal of Christ from a now-secular "holiday season."  
We may grieve the loss of someone dear to us  
    who has been such an important part of Christmas past.  
We may rejoice at the presence of beautiful children on Christmas morning,  
    or feel their absence.

And to be sure, if there is any sickness, any separation, any conflict,  
    any broken relationship, it will be felt even more poignantly at Christmas.

It was into just such a world as ours that Jesus was born.  
It was into this darkness that the light of the Star of Bethlehem shone so brightly;  
    and it is into our world that the Star still shines its light.  
Wherever you are. Whatever you face. You are not alone: God is with you.

Rejoice with the angels.  
Rise up with the Shepherds,  
Come with the Wise Ones of the earth,  
    and give your gifts.

Come and worship, come and adore,  
    God is in our midst.  
    God in highest heaven adored  
        is with us in the night and in the morning.

Light the candles, Receive your Savior and be of good cheer!