

Christmas Eve Sermon

- I. **The In-breaking:** There are times, very special times, when God just breaks into our lives, turns the order of things upside down, and changes how we experience reality forever. Sometimes these in-breakings are dramatic and compel our immediate attention. This is the way it was when God in God's own voice called to Moses out of the burning bush, and Moses' responded, "Here I am, Lord." This self-revelation of God is called a theophany. At other times God sends messengers, such as the angels who announced Christ's birth: "Behold I bring you good news of great joy to all people, to you is born this day the Messiah, the Lord!" God's messengers often do not engage in preliminaries! At one moment a group of shepherds was sitting quietly in the dark of night watching their sheep, and then, in an instant, a brilliant light shone all around them, an angel spoke, and a multitude of heavenly hosts began to sing. God broke into the mundane lives of a group of unnamed shepherds in a faraway place. And just imagine it – throughout the world this very night, the story of the shepherds has been re-enacted by children and adults using thousands upon thousands of bathrobes!
- II. **The birth of Christ, known as the Incarnation, is an in-breaking of phenomenal importance to those of us who are Christians. The following story is told (Cavanaugh, 1994) which helps us understand what is at the heart of the Incarnation.**

Once upon a cold Christmas Eve, a man sat in reflective silence before the fireplace, thinking about the meaning of Christmas. "There is no point to a God who became human," he mused. "Why would an all-powerful God want to share even one of his precious moments with the likes of us? And even if he did, why would God choose to be born in a stable? No way! The whole thing is absurd! I'm sure that if God really wanted to come down to earth, he would have chosen some other way."

Suddenly, the man was roused from his musing by a strange sound outside. Outside he saw a gaggle of snow geese frantically honking and wildly flapping their wings amid the deep snow and frigid cold. They seemed dazed and confused. Apparently, due to exhaustion, they had dropped out of a larger flock migrating to a warmer climate.

Moved to compassion, the man bundled up and went outside. He tried to "shoo" the shivering geese into the warm garage, but the more he "shooed," the more the geese panicked. "If they only realized that I'm trying to save them," he thought to himself. "How can I make them understand my concern for their well-being?"

Then a thought came to him: "If for just a minute, I could become one of them, if I could become a snow goose and communicate with them in their own language, then they would know what I'm trying to do."

In a flash of inspiration, he remembered it was Christmas Eve. A smile crossed his face. The Christmas story no longer seemed absurd. He visualized an ordinary-looking infant lying in a manger in a stable in Bethlehem. He understood the answer to his Christmas problem: God became one-like-us to tell us, in human terms that we can understand, that he loves us, that he loves us right now, and that he is committed to our well-being. The in-breaking of the Incarnation! Out he went to do his best to honk like a goose, flap his arms like wings, and lead these strays into the warm garage.

- III. We need to have a deep sense of the power of how God breaks into our lives. First, God breaks in in unpredictable ways -- ways that are different from what we might expect. Take the Incarnation. The circumstances of Christ's birth have been seen as scandalous: the Great Jehovah, whose name could not be pronounced by the Jews and who couldn't be seen for fear of instant death, came to earth as a small helpless baby! Not only that, but this baby was born to insignificant ordinary people in an insignificant town in an insignificant small country which was considered the backwater of the Roman Empire.

Further, to add insult to injury, this baby was born to an unwed, teenage mother in the rough surroundings of a stable. The very first announcement of the baby's birth was sent by special delivery to a group of no-name shepherds on the night shift just outside of town. In spite of the fact that they didn't have their best clothes with them and probably hadn't bathed in some time, they were the first ones beyond Mary and Joseph to see Jesus. In the ancient world, shepherds were quite undesirable folks, way down the social ladder. Why would they have been selected for this special honor?

The whole story of Jesus Christ, from the very beginning in Bethlehem, shows God's preference for the ordinary, those without a great deal of power, and those who have had struggles in their lives. Jesus did not generally seek out the wealthy community leaders and he certainly did not reach out for their approval or endorsement. He lived and died for all of us. In his humility, the humility of his birth, his life, his death, and his resurrection, Jesus gave us an invitation to join him. At the very essence of the Incarnation is the willingness of Christ to become one of us so that we could become more like him.

- IV. We do, therefore, know with great certainty, that God does break into our lives in miraculous ways, ways that can bend the natural order of things, because of how deeply God loves us. Let me share a modern miracle story. In his book *Angels* Billy Graham tells about a well-respected Philadelphia doctor who had gone to bed after an especially tiring day. Suddenly he was awakened by someone knocking at his door.

When he opened it, he found a little girl standing there, poorly dressed and deeply upset. She told him that her mother was very sick and asked if he would please come with her. It was bitterly cold outside, and the doctor was quite tired, but he dressed and followed the girl. When he arrived at the home, he found the woman desperately ill with pneumonia. After treating her, the doctor said, "You should be complimented on how caring and persistent your daughter is." But when the doctor looked around the room, the little girl was nowhere to be found. The woman looked at him strangely and said, "My daughter died a month ago." Could it be that one of God's angels had led him to that woman that night? Both of them sat in silent amazement at the miracle that had happened.

God created the natural world and God's in-breaking can bend or break natural laws. Many of us can attest to the presence of God's miraculous in-breaking into our lives – physical or emotional healings, relationships restored that seemed forever broken, material resources appearing when we are at our wit's end, and peace out of chaos and sadness. God does act in our lives, but sometimes like the snow geese, we may be too dazed or too confused to see God at work.

- V. Only see and believe this night. God can and does break into our lives in unpredictable, miraculous and wonderful ways. But remember – God's in-breaking must be discerned sometimes before we fully comprehend that it is God intervening. If we are willing to open ourselves to God's coming to us then a whole new partnership can begin. The shepherds, for example, did not remain passive spectators to the Incarnation. First, they went where they were directed, then they witnessed to others about what they had seen, and finally they glorified and praised God. The power of God had broken into their lives and they responded. Perhaps one reason God chose them was because he knew that they were likely to respond!

You see, the Incarnation changes those who truly witness the birth of Christ -- those who witnessed that birth 2000 years ago and those who witness that birth tonight. In fact, Christians over many, many generations have discovered that we do not just witness the birth of Christ. That's because Christ is born in us, incarnated in us, and then calls us to be "Christ to those around us." We are changed and we are healed – we see others differently and become more humble and generous not only to those we like and love, but also to all others around us. My friends, that is the source of our joy – the wonderful gift we have received, to be a part of God's in-breaking into the world and into the lives of others. Thanks be to God. Amen.