

Nov. 27,11 Advent 1Christmas Story Isa. 35:1-10

## LEAD ME BACK TO BETHLEHEM

It's amazing, today is the first Sunday in Advent. Last night we had a good turn out to prepare the church and enjoy some good soup and fellowship in preparation for Advent and most importantly, celebrating Jesus' birth. "For unto us a child is born" we will celebrate. As I get older the years seem to glide by so quickly. In October stores begin to put out their Christmas displays and have ordered their new products. Kind of hard to think of Christmas when you're walking around in 80 degree temps in shorts, or lounging around the pool or the beach. Some get angry that they are rushing Christmas. Even now that we have had Black Friday and earlier than usual store openings and Christmas flyers have been out enticing buyers to buy early. Some stores opened at 10 p.m. Thanksgiving day. Some began to camp out Wednesday night to be first in line at Best

Buy and perhaps other stores. So much for giving thanks to God and enjoying some family time.

When I see Christmas things in stores early I have mixed feelings. We haven't even had Halloween and you see Christmas stuff. Then I think it's a reminder soon and very soon we will be celebrating Christ's birthday being reminded Christmas is everyday because God is with us all the time. But for the stores it isn't about the Christmas story or about what Christmas means, it's about the clanging of cash registers recouping the money they need to make a profit each year. It's sad to say, in the marketing world it's all about the money.

Each week our choir will help us relive the Christmas story in order for us to be fully prepared for Christmas. The cantata is called "*Lead Me Back to Bethlehem.*"

Our theme is recapturing the joy, the peace of Christmas. Each year there is so much hustle and bustle to do shopping, get cards out, attend parties,

that by the time Christmas Eve comes or Christmas day arrives many are wiped out, too tired to enjoy the true meaning of Christmas. The next thing you know down comes the tree and you prepare for the new year and Christmas has come and gone and well, the message that God's Son was born is gone. And this year think of it. Christmas Eve is on Saturday and we will have our 7 p.m. Christmas Eve service and this year we celebrate the birth of Jesus Sunday morning with our regular service at 9 a.m.. Aren't you excited? I am! Did I hear a few "Amen's?" I wonder how many people will take time to come that morning to celebrate the birth of God's Son, Savior of the world and celebrate with the world God's greatest gift.

We know the old, old, story, but after hearing it so many times, and living through so many Christmas' have we lost the joy of that first Christmas when Christ was born? Have we bought into the worldly idea of Christmas forgetting the joy

that Mary and Joseph felt that night when she gave birth to their child?

The prophet Isaiah tells the world about that coming. They will "*See the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.*" Isaiah continues, "*Say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come.'*"

And now the time has come. God's plan that has been ready since creation is about to be fulfilled. That night, that wonderful night the world would be transformed in such a way it would never be the same. What a night that must have been. We know the story so well because we hear it over and over again each Christmas. We know how the angel appeared to Mary and told her she had found favor in the eyes of God and would be the earthly mother of his son, whom they shall call Emmanuel, that is 'God is with us' for he is the savior of the world sent from God to redeem the world. She has shared her story with Joseph and both have heard God's

message not to be afraid. It wouldn't be easy, for what will people say about Mary's pregnancy without her being married to Joseph? God assures them to fear not God is with them. That mystical night it all came together. The trip to Bethlehem... the time to deliver the baby....the manger....the heavenly choir rejoicing....God's son has been born.

Have we forgotten the joy of the light coming into the world of darkness? Isn't that what John's gospel tells us? "*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*" John said. "*Through him all things were made... In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it*" he also wrote.

Into the very darkness of the night when Mary and Joseph could not find a place to have their baby, their baby came to bring light and joy and peace and love and salvation to a world that had lost their joy, their hope. To a world that was struggling and seemed going in the wrong direction, a star shines

bright in the sky all over the world pointing its tip toward just one place, a manger in Bethlehem where God's son lies among the animals and a beaming Mary and Joseph take it all in. Their hearts are strangely warmed by the little baby she nurses and sings a lullaby to. It has been quite a night. Out of the night of chaos and rejection into the light comes peace. "*Infant holy, infant lowly, for a bed a cattle stall; oxen lowing, little knowing Christ the babe is Lord of all.*"

Have we forgotten the peace of Christmas? Remember how the angels proclaimed to the shepherds a baby was born in a manger who was Christ the King? The heavenly choir sang out "*Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.*"

How often we have heard that expression in Scripture from Jesus. Storms come up and he quiets them and calm comes. In the upper room during the Last Supper Jesus quiets the excited disciple's

hearts, *“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you....let not your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”* Later in the upper room following the resurrection Jesus appears to the disciples shows his wounds saying, *“Peace be with you....”* In Paul’s letter to the Galatians he wrote of the gift of God through the Holy Spirit. He wrote *“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”*

Joy, peace and then love. It’s hard to leave out John 3:16 at a time like this for that is the Christmas message. For out of the darkness came the light.

Yes, we know the Christmas story. You’ve heard it over and over again. During Advent you see signs of Christmas everywhere. Trees decorated, homes ablaze with lights. Salvation Army bell ringers at many stores. Christmas music begins to be heard. Schools and churches put on Christmas pageants. The new Christmas movies come out and the old ones are resurrected once again. Soon Charlie

Brown’s Christmas story will be seen on TV.

Dickens’s Christmas Carol, the old and new versions will pop up on the movie channel. Even “The Grinch who Stole Christmas” will be seen in cartoon and the movie version. The ‘Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street’ will be shown again and again as new people who never seen it will enjoy a happy ending. There are other favorites that will hit TV in the coming weeks. Funny...they want to take Christ out of Christmas yet all the great movies and Christmas shows are about Christmas not seasonal things. It’s Christmas time and we celebrate with joy the birth of God’ son. “Go tell it on the mountain” the hymn says. “Go tell it everywhere that Jesus Christ is born.” Such a story! Such a wonderful God! It’s pure joy.

Mary and Joseph made their journey to Bethlehem and found no inn was available for them to rest from their weary journey. But when doors are closed God opens a window. In this case it a window to a manger. Not a place one would think a king would be born. Not a place one would think you

would find God's Son. But it was there in Mary had her baby and laid him in a manger.

How many times have we placed our manger scene on mantles or around the base of our tree, or on a table and thought of it as just another part of the Christmas tradition? As we touch each piece and place them in their places do we remember the cast of characters that took part that night? Do we remember the joy and peace and love that came that first Christmas night...for Mary and Joseph...for the shepherd's in the fields....for the Wise Men...for the whole world? Or have we lost the excitement that comes with Christmas. "Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king." 'Bah Humbug,' some might declare.

It's so easy to get caught up in the shopping for gifts, the commercialism of the times. Some historians might argue what date or month Jesus was born. They miss the point. It isn't the date that is special it's what happened that day. God's Son, our

Savior was born. We Christians know better, don't we because God's word predicted it, and we know it to be true for it has been recorded in God's Word, "*That the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*"

We heard a few minutes ago, "*When we hear the Bethlehem story repeated year after year, do we forget its Holy power and mystery? Have we lost the joy and excitement of the story? Have we grown indifferent to its promise of life and peace?*"

I pray we will never forget its power and its mystery, for on that night God smiled as his son was delivered on this earth.

Throughout my years on this earth maybe I too have forgotten that joy that comes with Christmas from time to time. As a child maybe it was more about the gifts that were under the tree with my name on them. Even though I heard the Christmas story many times when Christmas came it wasn't always about the birth of the savior. Back then we had crèche sets and Christmas caroling singing "Joy

to the world the Lord is come. Let earth receive its King.” You were allowed to sing about Jesus in schools, and even have crèche sets in classrooms. I remember many joys of Christmas, and some sad ones, like when my dad was hit by a car in front of the house and spent Christmas in the hospital and because I was too young they would not let me in the room but my brother held me up so I could see my dad through a window and wave at him. Through all of them I never grasped that the Savior of the world had been born. In fact my Savior had been born. I just took that for granted.

Then one day I had a relationship with Jesus and the Christmas story came to live and had new meaning in my life and in our families lives as well. We celebrated the joy of Christmas. No gifts were unwrapped in our home until the Christmas story was read. Our son David, who is now a pastor, and Karen would have a short worship service prepared on Christmas morning. David was only 10 or 11 and destined to follow God’s call to ministry.

When I became pastor for the first time and got ready to celebrate two Christmas Eve services there was great joy in being able to tell the story in my words bringing to life the story of the birth of Jesus. I was excited and scared at the same time to share the Christmas message hoping to recapture the moment each time I told the story. Year after year I have told the story in some form 28 times. In all honesty as I prepare each year sometimes maybe the joy isn’t there as I wonder what more can I say to those who have heard the story a zillion times? How will the story change someone’s live this year? We have to be careful that the busyness of the season doesn’t take us away from the message of Christmas. That message calls to us today for the messenger proclaimed, *“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the city of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”*

But then it happens. When Advent starts. When I prepare each sermon. As we sing the Christmas

hymns it all comes alive and the joy of the Lord fills my heart and soul and I praise God for allowing me to tell his story hoping this year it will transform another life who will welcome Jesus into their lives as savior.

So choir, lead us back to Bethlehem and the old, old story that we really want to hear. The next few weeks sing about the fears that Mary and Joseph had. Share the excitement of the shepherds as they visited Mary's baby. Remind us of the journey of the Wise Men who followed a star just to find that child who was king so they could give them their gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. Tell us the story in song how Mary gathered all these things into her heart thanking God for allowing her the joy of being the earthly mother of his son. She pondered each visit and treasured them in her heart.

Yes, choir! Yes God! Take us back to Bethlehem and help us relive the story with new passion and new joy, with new understanding, with

renewed faith that the only gift we really need unwrap doesn't come lay under the tree, but in a manger. The greatest gift that one can receive is making room in your heart for Jesus. That's the joy, the peace and the love Christmas is all about.

We encourage you to return Sunday after Sunday this Advent season and bring your friends and your family and let's relive the story of Christ's birth putting aside the distractions that try to get our attention and focus the next few Sunday's on the story of the Christmas, the reason for the season.

Yes, take us back to Bethlehem so we can relive the joy, the peace, the love of that first Christmas so we can renew our walk with God thanking him for the greatest gift one could be given through his son, the gift of eternal life.

I'm looking forward to the journey. Are you?