

**A Sermon Preached
at
St. George's Madrid
by
The Reverend Canon John W. Kilgore, M.D.
24 December 2019
Christmas Eve
II Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11, 16
Acts 13:16-26
Luke 1:67-79**

“While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger...”

Merry Christmas! Happy Christmas! Feliz Navidad! Joyeaux Noel. Buon Natale!. However you say it, in America, in England, Italy, Spain, France, Russia, wherever, this is a special holiday. And we are all here celebrating! A very special day, a very special event.

This is a season, a day, a time, when the world's attention is focused — on Christmas. Just look at the way this city is decorated and the events happening and the families together and the joy on kids' faces. Just a bit ago we built the crib and sang Christmas carols with the children. Great fun and joy.

But our world is in chaos and tumult, we worry with impending Brexit; spreading nationalism; increasing polarization and strife; worrying tensions in the Koreas, fires in Australia,; chaotic America; climate change and severe weather... Yet we still celebrate this holiday, every year, for almost 2000 years now. It has been celebrated in other difficult times, the dark Middle Ages, the Crusades, changing empires, World Wars, the fall of Communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and more. And it has been celebrated in times of joy and prosperity and happiness and peace. For it is a message that is timeless; respect, and love, and dignity for all mankind. For Jesus came for all.

In 2014 Queen Elizabeth II said, “For me, the life of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, whose birth we celebrate today, is an inspiration and an anchor in my life. A role model of reconciliation and forgiveness, he stretched out his hands in love, acceptance, and healing. Christ's example has taught be to seek to respect and value all people, of whatever faith or none.”

But why is this strange birth of the Prince of Peace, laid in a manger when there was no room in the inn, so powerful, so enduring? Ralph W. Stockman said, “the hinge of history is on the door of a Bethlehem stable.” Why is it so impactful?

Such an unusual event. God as a poor babe, lying in a feed trough, yet worshipped and adored. A child born with the barest essentials of hospitality becomes host to the dispossessed and displaced of the world. Jesus, human and divine. How do we understand that, and why the message has been so powerful, through so much, and for so long? There is a story that

perhaps explains... It was published number of years ago, but the original author is unknown, despite many efforts to find that person. It goes like this:

The man to whom I'm going to introduce you was not a scrooge, he was a kind decent, mostly good man. Generous to his family, upright in his dealings with other men. But he just didn't believe all that incarnation stuff which the churches proclaim at Christmas Time. It just didn't make sense, and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. He just couldn't swallow the Jesus Story, about God coming to Earth as a man.

"I'm truly sorry to distress you," he told his wife, "but I'm not going with you to church this Christmas Eve." He said he'd feel like a hypocrite. That he'd much rather just stay at home, but that he would wait up for them. And so he stayed and they went to the midnight service.

Shortly after the family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries getting heavier and heavier and then went back to his fireside chair and began to read his newspaper. Minutes later he was startled by a thudding sound...Then another, and then another. Sort of a thump or a thud...At first he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against his living room window. But when he went to the front door to investigate he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They'd been caught in the storm and, in a desperate search for shelter, had tried to fly through his large landscape window.

Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze, so he remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter, if he could direct the birds to it.

Quickly he put on a coat, galoshes, tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on a light, but the birds did not come in. He figured food would entice them in. So he hurried back to the house, fetched bread crumbs, sprinkled them on the snow, making a trail to the yellow-lighted wide open doorway of the stable. But to his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs, and continued to flap around helplessly in the snow. He tried catching them...He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around them waving his arms...Instead, they scattered in every direction, except into the warm, lighted barn.

And then, he realized that they were afraid of him. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think of some way to let them know that they can trust me... That I am not trying to hurt them, but to help them. But how? Because any move he made tended to frighten them, confuse them. They just would not follow. They would not be led or shooed because they feared him.

"If only I could be a bird," he thought to himself, "and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to safety, warm...to the safe warm barn. But I would have to be one of them so they could see, and hear and understand."

At that moment the church bells began to ring. The sound reached his ears above the sounds of the wind. And he stood there listening to the bells – Adeste Fidelis – listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas.

And he sank to his knees in the snow.

Emmanuel. God with us. Jesus, Son of God, came among us, has made a difference in the world, through thick and thin, and continues to do so today and in the future. And for that we give thanks as we celebrate today.

Amen.