

Title: The Christmas Story: A Time of Wonder, Worship, and Transformation.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/nS6kJkSdys?si=8cEnfMEA-xhA-uhzI>

With its longing and hope, the Season of Advent has finally brought us to this place of celebrating the most spectacular event in human history. The chapter I just read from Luke's Gospel describes the Nativity of our Lord in marvelous and nostalgic detail. But tonight, I want to dust that old story off and give a behind-the-scenes, human look at what happened.

Saint Luke first sets the stage with historical markers that verify its place and time. He tells us that Emperor Augustus issued a decree that all the world should be registered. The story is no myth. It demanded action and movement so that people had to return to their hometowns to be registered and taxed. No doubt even a good person like Joseph gritted his teeth and muttered under his breath about the inconvenience it imposed. He'd have to close up the carpentry shop for days, losing revenue as he traveled back to his ancestral hometown of Bethlehem. Then, after spending money on food and lodging, he would have to pay even more for the taxes the Roman registry imposed. Then, Luke tells us, ***“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.”***¹

The nostalgia of this moment has inspired traditions and hymns that have endured throughout the centuries. However, the reality of Mary and Joseph's situation was far from ideal. The Savior of the world is born in what some scholars believe was a cavelike stable, and an animal's feeding trough is where the child is laid. Everything about it: the timing, the circumstances, and even the political arena into which he was born was far from

¹ Luke 2:6-7

perfect. And yet, the God who created the world and everything that exists came to live among us to assure us that there are no heartaches or depths of darkness that he would refuse to descend just to be with us. He loved us so much that he even took on our flesh with all of its vulnerabilities. And in that moment:

The unlimited chose to be limited.

The infinite became finite.

The unknowable became known.

The undefined became defined.

The wholly other became wholly present.

The unapproachable became approachable.

What had been eternally concealed was forever exposed.

And the way in which he chose to reveal himself was something no one would ever expect. The hope of the world is first revealed to ***“shepherds out in a field, keeping watch over their flock by night.”***² Shepherds were regarded as the lowest rung of the working class. But it was to them the angels came. At first, the shepherds ***“were terrified.”***³ But to their astonishment and surprise, they received a heavenly message: ***“Do not be afraid, for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”***⁴ Then, suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ***“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”***⁵ The blazing angelic glory that spreads its light and casts its shadows lasted only a few moments. But then, to everyone’s surprise, that heavenly glory resurfaces and manifests itself in all the details surrounding the story, even when its circumstances

² Luke 2:8

³ Luke 2:9

⁴ Luke 2:10-11

⁵ Luke 2:14

are difficult and far from cozy. Yet, even in this unpromising environment, hope is born. The prophet Isaiah tells us, “***Those living in the land of deep darkness, on them a light has dawned.***”⁶ The Apostle John likewise declares that “***the true Light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.***”⁷

Before the angel of the Lord departed from the shepherds, he declared, “***And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.***”⁸ When signs are given in the Bible, they have great significance, even if, at first glance, they are mysterious and puzzling. This “***babe wrapped in bands of cloth***”⁹ should cause us to stop and wonder. It causes us to think about how astonishing it is that God would make himself so helpless, vulnerable, and dependent. That babe, born into the most humbling of circumstances, wrapped in mere rags, with his hands bound, is a sign meant to show us that God has no wish to frighten us into recognizing him and no desire to impress us into worshipping him. Instead, he comes to us softly and tenderly, with no desire to force us into worshipping him. Therefore, the Christmas gift of God coming to live with us is filled with wonder and awe as each aspect of the story unfolds.

Johann Christoph Blumhardt reflected on this wonder with these words:

“The Savior of the world placed himself in the midst of our human condition. The Christ who was born is not like one who stands apart and looks down from a place high above us. ...No, he stoops low to raise us up. He

⁶ Isaiah 9:2

⁷ John 1:9

⁸ Luke 2:12

⁹ Ibid.

esteems the lowly, the sinners, and the worst among us. He associates with them and lets them associate with him.”¹⁰

If Christ went to such lengths to give you such freedom, don’t waste it. Each day, we walk through a world filled with signs of his love waiting to be revealed to those with open hearts and eyes that see.

The Christmas story concludes with ***“Mary, who treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”***¹¹ To recover the wonder of Christmas, we, too, must ponder these things and let them take hold of our hearts so that the glory of that first Christmas may not fade from our memories. It holds for us the hope that our own story, no matter how broken or painfully ordinary, can be made more genuinely alive and full of holy light.

Like the shepherds who ***“returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen,”***¹² we, too, can go from this place with a joy that is unspeakable and full of glory. The ***“Good News of Great Joy”***¹³ is God’s Christmas gift for people in all times and places. That Good News affirms that God has come to us, loves us, and is always with us. Its grace, as our New Testament lesson affirms, ***“instructs us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live sensible, upright, and godly lives in the present age.”***¹⁴ ***“For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”***¹⁵ Amen.

¹⁰ Johann Christoph Blumhardt, *Watch for the Light*, Plough Publishing House, 2001 (partly paraphrased)

¹¹ Luke 2:19

¹² Luke 2:20

¹³ Luke 2:10

¹⁴ Titus 2:11-12

¹⁵ Isaiah 9:6