

Nobody comes to Christmas Eve service to hear the sermon. That was the bit of wisdom that a pastor whom I deeply respect imparted on me during my first call. People show up on Christmas Eve for a number of reasons, spiritual and otherwise. They want to hear the story. They want to sing the songs. They want to be together with friends and family. They want to get home in time to eat dinner and have children open presents.

I can appreciate that. Before becoming a pastor I am sure that I shared some of that sentiment. However, we do a disservice to the spirit of the holiday when we reduce it to some Norman Rockwell-esque memories and stills in our mind.

The fact of the matter is that taming Christmas down to simply be about family and tradition misses the point of what God is doing in the story. Yes, there was a Holy Family. Yes, that family likely told Jesus, as a child, about the peculiar circumstances of his birth. But more than likely that is where the tradition would have stopped. When we look at the story of the nativity, we see God, breaking into the world in ways that turn our values on their heads.

This is the coming of God's anointed into the world. When we look at Moses, Joshua, or David, all who were to some extent, God's anointed, there was significant pageantry around them being proclaimed. They were immediately tasked with huge undertakings and emerged victoriously. People in positions of authority and power took note and paid homage to them.

The birth of the Christ Child is different. There was no proclamation to the king's court. There was no immediate undertaking that an infant was tasked with. Rather, it happened in a boring and mundane way. The family had been sent to register so that appropriate taxes could be collected. They were among many others, so much so that space for them was limited to lodging among the animals. During this time, Mary had a baby.

This caused quite a stir among the angels who took it upon themselves with announcement and singing to go tell the world, and they delivered this divine and important message to some shepherds, in the field, watching their herds.

I am sure that in their own way these shepherds were fantastic people. They may have even been at the top of their field, or pasture, however you want to put it. But that is beside the point. The angel came to the shepherds. The sky was filled with heavenly hosts singing praises to God before people who didn't even get to go home at night but rather were stuck out with their sheep.

The miracle of Christmas is an invitation to inclusion. The people involved, from the Holy Family to the Shepherds are by all accounts nothing special, that is what makes this event so special. We as people of faith are invited to carry this divine truth with us throughout our lives. We are invited to extend love, joy, and friendship to those who are so often left out and overlooked. God shows up in ordinary ways among ordinary people and does miraculous things. We are invited to see and experience God's presence around us. We are invited to be in the company of those who have been left out, to extend an invitation into a more full life together with them as the

kingdom of God unfolds around us. More than songs, or presents, or poignant moments among family, that is the spirit of Christmas. This season I invite you to take stock of who is absent from your festivities and extend an invitation to them, not because I believe that God will love us more if we do so, but so that we can experience the joy that comes from God's action in the world. Christ has been born on this day, let us celebrate with all creation today and always. Have a merry Christmas. Amen.