**Thursday, December 24th, 2020**

**Luke 2:1-20**

And so we come again to Christmas.

This year has been rather unusual, and a bit difficult.

Perhaps it would be helpful to take a closer look at the people around the manger.

There are not very many.

There is Joseph.

He is pacing and fretting a bit.

And who could blame him?

He is in an unusual and difficult situation.

Let's eavesdrop on his conversation with our Heavenly Father.

This isn't the way I planned it, God.

Not at all.   My child being born in a stable?

This isn't the way I thought it would be.

A cave with sheep and donkeys, hay and straw?

My wife giving birth with only the stars to hear her pain?

This isn't at all what I imagined.

No.              I imagined family.                    I imagined grandmothers.

I imagined neighbors clustered outside the door, and friends standing at my side.

I imagined the house erupting with the first cry of the infant.

Slaps on the back.       Loud laughter.      Jubilation.

That's how I thought it would be.

Did I miss something?

Did I, God?

When you sent the angel and spoke of the son being born –

          this isn't what I pictured.

I envisioned Jerusalem, the temple, the priests, and the people gathered to watch.

A pageant perhaps.    A parade.    After all, this is the Messiah!

Or, if not born in Jerusalem, how about Nazareth?

Wouldn't Nazareth have been better?

At least there I have my house and my business.

Out here, what do I have?

A weary donkey, a stack of firewood, and a pot of warm water.

This is not the way I wanted it to be!

Why a birth in a stable, God?

Any minute now Mary will give birth.

Not to a child, but to the Messiah.

Not to an infant, but to God.

That is what the angel said.

That is what Mary believes.

And God, my God, that is what I want to believe.

But surely you can understand.                  It is not easy.

It seems so . . . so . . . bizarre!

I am unaccustomed to such strangeness, God.

I am a carpenter.         I make things fit.         I square off the edges.

I follow the plumb line.        I measure twice before I cut once.

Surprises are not the friend of a builder.

I like to know the plan.      I like to see the plan before I begin.

But this time I am not the builder, am I?

This time I am a tool.     A hammer in your grip.     A chisel in your hands.

This project is yours, not mine.

I guess it is foolish of me to question you.

Forgive my struggling.

Trust doesn't come easy to me, God.

But you never said it would be easy, did you?

One final thing, Father.        The angel you sent?

Any chance you could send another?

If not an angel, maybe a person?

I don't know anyone around here, and some company would be nice.

Maybe the innkeeper or a traveler?

Even a shepherd would do.

Look. Over there by the manger – Mary is holding her newborn child.

God has entered our world as a baby.

Yet, if someone were to chance upon the sheep stable

          on the outskirts of Bethlehem that morning,

          what a peculiar scene they would behold.

The stable stinks like all stables do.        The ground is hard.

The hay scarce.          Cobwebs cling to the ceiling.

And a mouse scurries across the dirt floor.

A more lowly place of birth could not exist.

But Mary is wide awake.          How young she looks.

Her head rests on the soft leather of Joseph's saddle.

The pain has been eclipsed by wonder.

She gazes into the face of the baby.

Her son.

Her Lord.

His Majesty.

At this point in history, the human being who best understands who God is,

          and what he is doing, is a teenage girl in a smelly stable.

She can't take her eyes off him.

Mary knows she is holding God.

She remembers the words of the angel:

“His kingdom will never end.”

He looks like anything but a king.

His face is wrinkled and red.

He is absolutely dependent upon Mary for his well-being.

Majesty in the midst of the mundane.

She touches the face of the infant-God, and whispers:

          What a long journey you have made!

          You have come from so far away, so you could come so close to us.

You shall be called Emmanuel – God is with us.

What great love you have for us!

Look! The Shepherds have arrived!

Blessed are the meek.

Blessed are the available.

Blessed are the conduits, the tunnels, the tools.

This is why the announcement went first to the shepherds.

They didn't ask God if he was sure he knew what he was doing.

If the angel had gone to theologians,

          they would have first consulted their commentaries.

Had he gone to the elite,

          they would have looked around to see if anyone was watching.

Had he gone to the successful,

          they would have first looked at their calendars.

So the angel was sent to the shepherds.

Men who did not have

          a reputation to protect,

                    or an ax to grind,

                              or a ladder to climb.

Men who did not know enough

          to tell God that angels don't sing to sheep,

                    and that Messiahs aren't found wrapped in rags,

                              and sleeping in a feed trough.

And so . . .

          While the theologians were sleeping,

                    and the elite were dreaming,

                              and the successful were snoring,

                                        the meek were kneeling.

They were kneeling before the One only the meek will see.

          They were kneeling before Jesus in the manger.

The shepherds returned to their sheep,

          glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen

We also come to the manger.

          Like Joseph we may do a little pacing,

                    and perhaps fretting a bit.

          Like Mary we gaze at the newborn child with wonder.

          With the shepherds we pause for a moment,

                    as we return to our daily lives,

                              glorifying and praising God

                                        for all we have heard and seen.

And the newborn child sleeps peacefully in the manger in a stable.

And he shall be called Emmanuel –

          which means God is with us –

                    Always

                              Forever.

AMEN