



northminster presbyterian church

2400 old alabama road  
roswell, georgia 30076

24-Dec-2006 Christmas Eve, 11:30 P.M.

**SCRIPTURE:** Luke 2:1-20

**SERMON:** Present At The Manger (Rev. Susan Haynes)

Earlier this week, my daughter and I were talking about late night Christmas Eve services. Christie realized she could not remember a time she had not attended the late night Christmas Eve service. That caused me to remember the only time I have not attended the late night Christmas Eve service is when she was 18 months old. We both agreed that, for us, a lot of the Christmas "experience" is worshipping at the late night Christmas Eve service. There truly is a poignant stillness about this time of night, as we stand on the edge of the day when we celebrate the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is a holiness that is so palpable you want to reach out and embrace it.

Have you ever thought about those who were present at the manger the night Jesus was born? Have you ever wondered about what they were thinking and feeling... to see and be a part of the action that took place at the manger? Although the author of the Gospel of Luke has written the nativity narrative so proficiently and beautifully that many of us, if called upon, could recite the verses, these simple, yet eloquent words in no way capture the action and drama that occurred that holy night.

*What did it mean to Mary, to be present at the manger?*

Mary, a wide-eyed teenaged girl, giving birth to the son of God. As a woman, I find the words, "and she gave birth to her first-born son" almost humorous. It's as if... *poof!* Mary had a baby. Nothing about the angel visitation. Nothing about wondering how Joseph would react when he discovered that she, his betrothed, was pregnant... knowing it was not his child. Nothing about how Elizabeth's baby leaped in her womb upon hearing Mary's voice. Nothing about the neighbors' furtive glances at her growing belly when she arrived back from visiting her cousin Elizabeth, herself pregnant long after a woman normally could become pregnant. Nothing about the hours of labor that normally occur with a first birth. Just the simple words: "and she gave birth to her first-born son." The only hint that Mary might have been just a wee bit overwhelmed by all that had occurred to her was again just a few simple words: "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart."

*What did it mean to Joseph, to be present at the manger?*

Puzzled, but faithful, Joseph, who kept Mary close to him despite the rumors and threats that no doubt accompanied her pregnancy. Joseph, visited by an angel who tells him he will be the earthly father of the Son of God. Joseph, traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem with his very pregnant betrothed, probably expecting to find a place to stay with relatives, only to be shunted off to the area between the house and the stable because others from a higher rung on the Palestinian social ladder had claimed the upper room where guests normally stayed. Not even a woman who had reached full-term in her pregnancy could trump the Palestinian social ladder. (Perhaps, 2000 years later, things haven't changed as much as we would like to think they have.) Joseph, who may have wondered if he had really lost his mind, when later, he and Mary and the baby are visited by a rag tag bunch of stinky shepherds, who came themselves because an angel had told them: "for to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

*What did it mean to the shepherds, to be present at the manger?*

Shepherds, the lowly and despised of society. The ones for whom even the religious leaders had nothing but disdain because they worked at a job that demanded they work on the Sabbath, thereby breaking Jewish law. The same shepherds who would rather break the Jewish law than leave their sheep unattended to be prey for larger, stronger animals. Those shepherds left their flocks they were keeping watch over and went to find “the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” Of course, they may have selected one of their number to stay behind and watch the sheep. I’d rather think that they figured if God would speak to them through an angel, that same God was fully capable of taking care of their sheep while they did what God told them to do!

*What did it mean for the animals, to be present at the manger?*

I realize that some of us, more than others, tend to foist human characteristics upon animals. There is even a legend about the animals present at the manger talking the night Jesus was born. But don’t you suppose among the lowing of the cows, the bleating of the sheep, the continuous scratching of the chickens, there was some recognition by the animals present that something unusual was happening? We know animals can “sense” things. We’ve heard of the elephants that ran to higher ground just prior to the tsunami. As powerful as that tsunami was, don’t you think the power of the tsunami paled in comparison to the holy power present that quiet, still night in a manger in the city of Bethlehem and that the animals present at the manger sensed that holy power?

What happened at the manger that night was not Christmas card sweetness, it was nitty-gritty reality; a reality that gave birth to the present at the manger. You see, while Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the animals were present at the manger, there was also a *present* at the manger. A *present* for which I, as I am sure is true for you, am very thankful.

As the lead pastor for pastoral care in this congregation, daily I talk or visit with members and visitors. I can testify to the fact that Christians are not immune to the vagaries of life. This past year, in this congregation, some of us have experienced death, divorce, life-threatening illnesses, unemployment, financial challenges, depression and despair. If it can happen, more than likely it has happened to someone who has worshiped in this space this year. And now, at Christmas, it is like someone has taken that pain and magnified it exponentially.

This is why it is so important to me to be here. Even those years when I was sitting there where you are instead of standing here where I now am. Here late on Christmas Eve night so I too can be present at the manger. So that, just as I gulp in water when I’m working in my yard on one of those 90+ degree days in mid-summer, I can greedily gulp in the love that was born that night. For I, and you, need all that *present* in the manger gave that night to live all the other 364 nights and days of the year. So that I, and you, can have hope even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. So that I, and you, can present Him to a world that hungers and thirsts for the love and joy *that only He can give*.

What does it mean to you to be present at the manger? *What does the present at the manger mean to you?*

The time is drawing close. The baby’s first birthing cries are about to be heard. The present at the manger is waiting...*to be presented to the world! Amen.*

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### **Luke 2:1-20**

1In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for

you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” 15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

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