

Christmas Eve 2021

Luke 2:1-20

Pastor Ann Hultquist

It was a balmy Wednesday afternoon in Houston, Texas, a couple of days before Christmas 1971. Two ladies were busy cleaning the pews at St. Anne's Catholic Church when they heard what sounded like a baby crying. They turned to one another "Did you hear that?"

It seemed unlikely that anyone else was in the church, but they followed the noise, walking out of the side chapel into the main sanctuary. They heard the cry again, really almost wailing by that point, and they followed the sound to the large Nativity scene set up in the front. There, lying next to the statue of baby Jesus, was a baby--a real baby--in their manger!

You can imagine that their discovery made the news--front page news, actually. He was about five days old and pretty healthy--no security camera footage, no note left. Eventually adopted by a family in Texas, he grew up as DJ Williams. He always knew he was adopted, but it wasn't until he was 15 that an aunt showed him the newspaper headline: "Manger Baby" it said in bold type.

The years went by and, as we all know, DNA searches have become ubiquitous. Almost fifty years later, DJ found 3 biological half sisters and a brother, all younger, eager to meet and get to know him. Their mother had died, so the answers to "Why?" and "How?" will remain a mystery. But his newfound sister summed up their reaction to what they did know: "Who would believe it?" she said. "A *real baby* in the manger."

Who would believe it? A baby in a manger. It wasn't exactly what Mary had in mind, do you think, or Joseph for that matter...But the power of Caesar had intervened and sent them to Bethlehem along with all the other relatives. The extended family is all full up, the inn as well, and so there they are in the stable. Their first hours with their new baby are not shared with friends or family, but with strangers--shepherds who burst in on them in the middle of the night.

Who would believe it? Not them, at first--it was a dark night like every other night in the hills, surrounded by sleeping sheep. And then all that light and the angel-- "a Savior is born to you"--and then a hundred angels all singing "Glory!" in the sky. Fear, stammering to one another "Let's go and see!" They run, and it is just as they heard: a baby...the Messiah...the Savior...in a manger. They stand there, shaking their heads in wonder.

Can *you* believe it? A baby in the manger...you've heard the verses from Luke before, maybe once or twice, maybe hundreds of times. We call it *The Christmas Story*--and sometimes, it becomes just that, doesn't it? A story, one of many that we know, something that happened so long ago and is so simple. Too simple, we might think, for this complex, difficult, and sometimes frightening world we live in.

What a couple of years it has been... I don't think there are enough words to describe all that we have experienced, seen, learned and come to know about ourselves and the people around us. The pandemic has shaken all of us communally and each of us specifically. This time last year we were leaning forward with hope into a vaccine-enabled finish line; but now we're living a different reality, aren't we. So frustrating, so tiring, so disappointing.

Add to that all the rest--gun violence in and out of schools, wildfires that last year round, a painful withdrawal from Afghanistan, hateful speech and anger that seeks to divide and belittle, and fear--so much fear.

In your own life this year there have been hard things--a lost job, grief, a broken heart, a failure, family mess--or maybe just the roller coaster ride that is life.

And yet, here you are: listening, wondering if any of this is for you, singing a little or a lot...You know something, I think: that all the presents and all the politicians and all the talking heads can't give us what we long for, can't quiet the restlessness in our hearts.

So you come to a baby, born in a stable. So simple, and yet this child is God's answer to the turmoil around us and inside us. The light came to those dark fields and that dim stable in Bethlehem because God longs, has always longed, for us to

know God's love for the world and for us...for you. If you're not sure about that "for you," hold on to this promise:

In Jesus, God enters all of human life--all of it--Emmanuel, God With Us. Always. Everywhere. In every moment, every breath. God With Us.

A simple manger was just the right beginning to the life of a Savior who would reach out to touch those who were broken, afraid, or hopeless; and who, on the cross, would open his arms to all. When faced with hatred and violence, Jesus responded with love...love. That love of Jesus, that mercy, forgiveness and hope are for you tonight--for all of us, no exceptions.

We are sent from here this Christmas Eve to carry that love, to care for this imperfect beautiful world and for one another. "We love," scripture says, "because Christ first loved us."

It all begins with this simple story, about a real baby in the manger.