**Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20**

**Christmas Eve; December 24, 2016**

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One of my most enduring memories of Christmas Eve is of our family gathered in the living room, just before bedtime. The Christmas tree would be on: sparkling with colored lights and wrinkled strands of silver tinsel and filled with every kind of ornament you can imagine, from the ridiculous to the sublime, complete with wrapped presents underneath.

The stockings my mother had made for each of us would be hanging from the mantle piece. Dad would make a Christmas toddy. Grandmom would get Santa’s glass of milk and plate of cookies. And my brother, sister and I would scramble to get our pajamas on and find our copy of *The Night Before Christmas* and the family Bible.

It was only then, in that moment, surrounded by those people, those sights and sounds and smells, that I knew for sure that Christmas had come. And it would only be a few hours before we would wake up to see how good Santa thought we had been that year.

It’s been many years since I’ve had a Christmas Eve like that, but the memory comes flooding back every year. My grandmother and father are no longer with us and Mom no longer lives in the house where we grew up. But every year, I still go through the machinations and preparations to create that same feeling, wherever we are.

It’s what many of us, I suspect, have been working toward for weeks now: finishing classes and taking exams or wrapping up business, shopping for gifts, baking cookies, sending cards, cleaning the house, decorating the tree, readying the guest room and planning menus -- whatever it takes to create the kind of Christmas we need.

Despite our efforts to create the kind of Christmas we need, this story reminds us that God has already done that. God has already given us everything we need. You won’t find it in an elegantly wrapped box under the tree, but it is more precious than gold. You can’t possibly buy it in a store, but the gift will come at great cost to the divine giver, who will spare nothing to let us know how much we are loved.

The story is simple and the characters are quite ordinary, really. Mary and Joseph, like everyone else, made their way to the town where the Roman government required them to register and pay taxes. It was an 80 mile trek from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem. No one granted them an exemption from the long, hard journey, even though Mary was pregnant.

They weren’t rich or famous or glamorous; they didn’t know people in powerful places; they didn’t even have a decent place to stay when it was time for Jesus to be born. There was nothing remarkable about them, nothing to alert anyone that they might be worthy of extra attention or care, especially that night. And yet, God had chosen this ordinary, unremarkable couple to bring the Christ child into the world.

And, the shepherds … Like Mary and Joseph, they, too, were quite ordinary, unremarkable. They were doing their job that night, as always, sleeping in the fields outside the city, watching over their sheep. They were dirty and disheveled and they didn’t make for great company.

They were rough around the edges and they didn’t have much to offer by way of conversation or social graces. And yet, it was to these peasant shepherds that God chose to make known the birth of God’s son and to trust, in turn, that they would tell others. You could hardly get more ordinary.

And yet, it was extraordinary.

God, who could choose to be revealed anyway God wanted, chose to come to us in the most ordinary of ways, as one of us – in the form of baby - a bundle of human flesh, tiny and vulnerable, love incarnate.

There were no royal attendants, no mid-wives, no bugles or royal pronouncements, only a tired mother and father with a newborn snuggled up in the straw of a stable because they literally had no place else to go. There were no family members or friends to bring nourishment; no one to teach the new mother how to nurse; no rabbi to visit and bless the newborn, just a curious bunch of barnyard animals and a bedraggled group of sheep farmers.

When we come to the table later in the service, we will give thanks for all God’s gifts to us: the gift of creation, the gift of the son, and the gift of the Spirit. Here, we will feast on a Christmas dinner like no other, prepared for us by Christ himself from the ordinary elements of bread and wine, made extraordinary by the love with which they are offered, a reminder that God has already given us all that we need.

It is then, in that moment, surrounded by these people, and these sights and sounds and smells, that you will know for sure that Christmas had come, indeed.

Thanks be to God!