

Come From Away

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2023 || Christmas Eve Morning Worship

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Today is Christmas Eve—The day we have been waiting for and preparing for, for the whole season of Advent is finally here! Jesus is Born!

(This morning every time you hear me say Jesus is Born this morning, I invite you make a quick sound of celebration with your cheers, your voices, your instruments from the children’s library, a joyful noise—practice now)

JESUS IS BORN!

As we waited for this day, we lit candles: candles of hope, love, joy, and peace. And today, on Christmas Eve, we have lit the center white candle. This candle represents Jesus and is called the Christ Candle. When we light this candle, we remember Jesus’ birth and remember that our waiting has ended. JESUS IS BORN! When we look at the center candle, we remember that Jesus is the light of the world. We remember that Jesus has *come from away* to give hope, peace, joy, and love to all people.

Now a question for you:

When you receive a gift, a present, something precious, dear, and valuable what do you do with it to make sure that it lasts, is safely secured, will not be lost or damaged? Do you put it away in a safe place? Do you enjoy it for as long as it lasts? Do you keep it somewhere special? Well, at Christmas we talk about the gift of Jesus and in one of my favorite Christmas hymns we hear that when JESUS IS BORN and there was no crib for a bed—Mary put Jesus safely *Away in a Manger*.

Who knows what a manger is? If you have ever seen a Nativity scene you might think that a manger is a cute little bed for a baby full of cozy and warm straw—but a manger is actually a place for food, for animals. But also, if you ever learn the French language, you will also learn that the verb “manger” means “to eat.” A manger is an eating place—but it also becomes a place where Jesus experiences his first few moments of life. When Mary places Jesus in the manger she also helps us understand better who Jesus has come to be—bread for the world. Born in Bethlehem, which means “House of Bread” and placed in a manger—an eating place—the Gospel of Luke helps us to see from the very beginning of the story that JESUS IS BORN to be the Bread of Life.¹ From the very beginning all the way to the very end of the story we will see Jesus gathering together to share meals with people, to feed the hungry, to remind the people that Jesus will always be with us in the bread of communion, and that Jesus will be revealed to us through the breaking of bread like in the story of the Road to Emmaus.

Yet, when Jesus is put away in the manger, Jesus is also set apart in a safe place for safekeeping. Mary knows that JESUS IS BORN into a dangerous world, because Jesus is a promise from God that the proud will be scattered, the powerful brought down from their thrones, the lowly lifted up, the hungry filled with good things, and the rich sent away empty. And Jesus will continue to tell this truth to people with power even when it is risky or dangerous. And yet, the whole point of this story is that Jesus has come from away not to be put away for safekeeping, but to draw near and close to us—no matter how dangerous it might be. JESUS IS BORN! Jesus is among us. Jesus is Emmanuel. Jesus is God-With-Us

And so, this Christmas Eve, I invite you to remember that God has guided us to the true meaning of Christmas during Advent. That JESUS IS BORN! That God has come into the world as Emmanuel—God-With-Us to be with us so that we might experience hope, joy, love, and peace. And God is STILL with us, often showing up to us not with angelic pronouncements and proclamations, but through people. Through moments of connection that remind us that we are held by one another in community.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Light of the World: A Beginner’s Guide to Advent* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 87.

I now want to invite all of our children and young people into the sanctuary to come join me in the front of the Sanctuary so that I can give you a gift! A Christmas ornament that comes from Bethlehem and made of ancient olive wood that may have been around since the time of Jesus. These gifts from Jesus' hometown, connect us to that place and come to us from an MVP who wanted us to make sure that the people in Jesus' hometown did not get forgotten this Christmas. These gifts were made by Basma and her family who live in Beit Sahour (the place where the shepherds are thought to have come from away to see the newborn baby Jesus) in the West Bank of Palestine. Because of the war in the Holy Land all the inns in Bethlehem are closed (with no tourists coming to visit) and according to many in Bethlehem Christmas is cancelled this year, as grief and loss fills the land—one pastor in Bethlehem nevertheless has set up a different kind of Nativity this year where Jesus can be found in amongst the rubble from the destruction of war. Sometimes it can be easy to hear news about war and to feel of helplessness, but through these gifts we are reminded that Jesus arrives not only in good times with peaceful starry skies and singing angels, but in difficult, even terribly difficult times, Palestine under occupation, then even as now. Yet, we know, and I pray that these ornaments will remind us that God is with us even when we are surrounded by the rubble of war.

Some of the ornaments are stables that will help you remember the taste of the bread of life that can be found away in a manger. Some of them are bells that will help you remember the sound of the good news of the angels and shepherds. And some of the ornaments are stars that will help you remember the sight of light in the darkness. This Christmas Eve, I want to invite you to remember and rejoice, because JESUS IS BORN. And want to invite you to seek to live every day remembering that you are loved by God and are called to show that the love to others.

Think About That. Amen.