

“WHAT I WANT TO BE FOR CHRISTMAS”

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2018 7pm

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When I was a child, my church did a children’s Christmas program in the afternoon on the last Sunday of Advent. It was always the same. We dressed up in costume and acted out the “Christmas story.” I don’t remember it very well, but I’m sure the first year I was in it, I was a sheep complete with ears and tail. Later I would be an angel, a shepherd, a wiseman, and finally the narrator. I liked being the narrator best, since it didn’t involve a costume. I was never really into the drama, though some of the other children were very invested in getting to play certain roles.

Of course, we didn’t actually try to imagine what it would be like to be one of these characters. If you could be one of these people who would you want to be? One of the shepherds who stayed awake nights to defend the sheep against predators. Shepherds belonged to the poor working class, not a highly respected profession, often thought of as little better than thieves. Would you be willing to sleep on the ground in short shifts and scramble to find shelter when the weather turned bad... just so you could be there when the angels appeared?

Ever heard an angel sing? Wouldn’t you like to be that shepherd who heard the angel choir? Wouldn’t you like to have been among the first to hear the news that your savior had been born not that far away? I wonder what salvation looks like to a shepherd. Do people suddenly start valuing the important work you do? What exactly is God promising to do for these shepherds?

And what about the poor today? Is there a song for them, a promise to them, a Christ for them? Would you want to be among the poor shepherds to hear good news, to see Mary and Joseph, and to have the privilege to look upon the Christ Child? Would you like to be a shepherd for Christmas, a witness to the birth of Jesus?

Maybe you’d like to deliver the good news, to sing the song of peace on earth and good will to all? Maybe you’d like to be the one who calmed the fears? If you were an angel, what good news of great joy would you bring? What message from God do you have to deliver? What song do you have to sing? Would you like to be an angel for Christmas?

Maybe you’d like to be Joseph, the one who listens to angels in his dreams, who protects Jesus from harm? You could stand with the vulnerable Marys of the world. That’s a task that still needs doing. What would it be like, I wonder, to be one of Jesus’ parents?

Or perhaps you see yourself as Mary, the servant of the Lord, the one who early theologians referred to as the “god-bearer.” I know it sounds a little arrogant or like a lot of responsibility... but this is what followers of Jesus do: introduce God to the world.

No one imagines themselves as the infant. We are clear that we cannot be Jesus. And yet, we have all been infants once... vulnerable and utterly dependent. Look in the manger and you will see a human being. Divine... yes. Holy... yes... but also very human.

Theologian Karl Barth claims that Jesus came precisely to show us how to be human, how to be the best human. When we cease to conform to the person of Jesus, we cease to be human. In fact, Barth sees "sin" as things that take away from our humanity, that cover over the image of God in us.

What do you want to be for Christmas? You can't be those shepherds, but you can be the sort of person who is alert to good news in the midst of your work and play, who hears the angels sing, who makes haste to see the Christ and bears witness to the presence of God in the very ordinary experiences of life.

You can't be that angel choir, but you can sing a song about God becoming flesh. You can bear messages of God's love in places where that love is not yet known.

You can't be Joseph, but you can be a dreamer, an advocate for the poor, a defender of the vulnerable, and a parent to the child of God in each of us.

You can't be Mary, but you can be a servant of the Lord, bringing God into your world, announcing good news, singing a song about God's deliverance.

And you can't be Jesus, but you can be a child of God. You can look into the manger and see something of yourself in the infant. You and Jesus share something very important. You are both loved by God. You are both bringing the God who is in heaven down to earth.

Jesus, Emmanuel, the Word made flesh, God with us: This is Christmas. It began in a little town called Bethlehem many years ago. And it is here today.

What do you want to be for Christmas? A shepherd, an angel, Joseph and Mary: all good roles to aspire to. But consider being even a little bolder, consider being God's child sharing God's love with the world. This is the life that lay ahead for that baby in a manger. It is the life implicit in our very name: Christian, which means, "little Christ."

What do you want to be for Christmas? Jesus was the love of God made real to certain poor shepherds in the little town of Bethlehem many years ago. Hear from the manger a call to you to be the love of God in this time and place where love is so very much needed.

Amen.