

A Living Nativity

A Message for Christmas Eve

Preached by

**Jeffrey W. Gibelius, Pastor
Second Presbyterian Church,
Carlisle, Pennsylvania**

December 24, 2009

Have you ever seen an outdoor “living nativity”? In some areas they’re a Christmas tradition. Our church had one when I was growing up; right in front of our building. The stable was made of plywood, sheet metal, and two by fours, just like the one where Jesus was born. People had to walk right past Mary and Joseph to get in the sanctuary on Christmas Eve. One year my older sister, Robin, played Mary. If you ask me, she wasn’t very convincing; Mary wouldn’t have beaten up her younger brother on a regular basis. And then there were the wise men. These 300 pound guys weren’t fooling anyone either. Beneath their fancy robes they had on puffy down parkas to protect them from the bitter cold of upstate New York. They looked like Michelin Men in pack boots. It didn’t help the authenticity factor that my friends and I from the Confirmation Class would sneak up on the sanctuary roof and whip snowballs at the Holy Family when no one was looking. It’s not like they could fight back; not since they were representing “peace on earth” and all.

I’ve never actually been *in* a living nativity. How about you? If you *were* asked to be in one, which Biblical character do you think you would choose to play? Don’t worry that you’re too old or too young or the wrong sex. Consider each of the human “stars” of the nativity story. Each of them had to overcome a serious obstacle to make it to the stable; each of them took a risk to get there. I wonder if there’s someone in the Christmas Eve nativity scene that you can relate to tonight.

Anybody feeling afraid? You don’t have to raise your hand; it’s not so easy to admit. But if you are feeling some anxiety tonight, maybe you should be a shepherd. They had to overcome some pretty serious fears when the angels first appeared. *Then* they had to overcome their fear of being rejected when they went to see the new king. (Shepherds weren’t thought of very highly in those days). But if they hadn’t gone to the stable *in spite of their fears* then people around the

world would have a lot less reason to celebrate tonight. The shepherds' presence in the stable tells us that God's good news starts with the anxious, poor, and lowly. The angels' first words to them were: fear not. Are you afraid this Christmas? Wondering what will happen if you do what you think God is asking you to do? If so, you've got a lot in common with the shepherds. Act like they did: feel the fear and do God's will anyway. God will not let you down.

Maybe you feel a little like Mary. God really challenged her to believe in herself and her chosen-ness. She was young – about thirteen – poor, and, of course, a woman. In those days poor young women didn't get called on to do great things, not by God, not by anyone. Mary had to overcome her self-doubt so that she could say, "Yes," to God. And because of her "Yes," we know that *any of us* can be chosen to serve God, too. Some of us still don't believe that we are called and chosen, not because God hasn't put opportunities for service in front of us, but because we don't think of ourselves as the type of person God calls. Mary's story tells us that *all* of us can be God bearers, birthing hope in a hurting world.

And of course we need some people to play Joseph. In order to get to the stable Joseph had to set aside all concern for his reputation. He knew what people were going to say about him – and Mary – once they learned that she was pregnant: *She* was loose; *he* was a fool. He went to the stable anyway. He was more concerned with what *God* thought of him than with what *others* did. Joseph knew that God's will is more important than our reputation, even our reputation for "Godliness." God may even call you and me to do some things that most supposedly "Godly" people will not understand. Go to "the stable" anyway. Drawing close to Jesus is worth risking what people might say about us.

Anyone feeling a little lost tonight? The wise men were asked to follow a star, to a place they'd never been before, to worship a king they had never met. *No easy task*. Following a star isn't like following a GPS; a star doesn't exactly say, "You have arrived," when you pull up to the right stable. Some of you know what following a star feels like. You've been asked by God to do something for him with – at best – only *sketchy* details – and all you've got is a promise that God will lead you and that you'll be able to share your gifts when you finally arrive. Follow the star anyway.

If I were making my own living nativity, I'd add cast someone to be an innkeeper. A lot of us are like him. We don't know why there wasn't enough room at the inn that night anymore than we know why there is so little room in our lives for Jesus today. How much trouble would it have been for that innkeeper to

make some corner of the “inn” clean and comfortable for a pregnant teenager to give birth? The thing that keeps Jesus at arms length in most of our lives isn’t so much lack of belief as busy-ness; there’s simply no room for him in our lives. Have you ever been so busy that even a small act of kindness feels like an imposition? Sure. We’ve all had those moments – or months. That’s *too* busy. God is often in the interruptions. Maybe we need to slow down so we don’t end up turning away opportunities that are pregnant with possibility for no good reason at all.

And if we really want to make our living nativity complete we’d need to have King Herod lurking somewhere. I don’t know if any of us would want to play him, but some of us *feel* like him, I’m sure. Herod reminds us that not everyone is ready for Jesus to be King. For Herod it meant admitting that *he* was not the King of Kings. Herod didn’t want to be reminded that God had chosen another as his anointed one.

So Herod tried as best he could to kill the child. He could have been *truly* great – with God’s help. But he settled for what he could do on his own. Some of us do that, don’t we? What a shame. We’re afraid to put Jesus first in our lives. Afraid to admit that we need him. When we do that we keep ourselves as far away from Bethlehem as Herod was when the baby was born.

So what character are you playing in God’s living nativity? Where are you standing? Are you with the shepherds or wise men? Mary or Joseph? The Innkeeper or Herod?

Wherever you are tonight, there’s a place for you right here, close to Jesus. He needs people to

- spread the Good News,
- bear him into the world,
- risk their reputations for him,
- follow without clear answers,
- make room in their lives,
- and put Him first.

Becoming a part of God’s living nativity brings great rewards.

- The shepherds were the first to hear the news.

- Mary gained a son.
- Joseph got a reputation for true faithfulness.
- The wise men found their king.
- And the Innkeeper, well, he and Herod, missed out on being part of the greatest story of ever told.

If I interpret that the nativity story correctly, tonight God is inviting you and me to play *our* parts in *our* time. And as we do so we will find that the promise of the story – peace on earth and good will to all – will become the truth of our lives. Amen.

Dear Friend,

I hope you have been blessed by this message. You can request a free audio-tape or CD recording of this sermon by contacting the church office. We also have a complete sermon archive (including audio-files and PDFs) on-line at www.GrowWithSecond.org

Second Presbyterian Church is a thriving congregation celebrating over 175 years of service to God and God's people. It would be our joy to help you grow in faith, hope, and love. Please consider being our guest for Sunday worship at 8 or 10:30am. Children's Church and infant and toddler care are always provided.

Jeff Gibelius, Pastor

Second Presbyterian Church

528 Garland Dr.

Carlisle, PA 17013

www.GrowWithSecond.org

717-243-4571

© 2009 Jeffrey Gibelius

This sermon is intended for personal use and distribution. If you want to use it for anything else, I'd be honored. Just call for permission. No claims of absolute originality are made for this material. As one man said, "I churn my own butter, but I use milk from other men's cows."