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In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,\* the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,\* praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"\*

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." <sup>16</sup> So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

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It is astonishing that we are celebrating the birth of a little child. Who believes that a little infant darling baby is going to save the world?

Babies are weak, defenseless, helpless, and can do nothing for themselves, except cry to make their needs known. But what good is a baby as a leader? That's **astonishing!**

There is a dark edge to this. In ancient and medieval dynasties, it was very important for the ruler or king to have a child, especially a male heir to continue the dynasty. Even England rejoiced when Prince Charles had two sons by Princess Diana, because *someday* one of them will be the King of England. But too often, because of the dangers of life and failures in battle, adolescents or even children were elevated to become king. As much as a male child was valued for the *future*, it was no blessing if that child had to grow up too soon, or take charge even as a figurehead before he was grown. When the prophet says "the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and a little child shall lead them," it contains a very mixed message.

I've become more than a little cynical about politics, and I am not alone. Millions of Americans don't bother to vote anymore. We're already sucked into the Fall 2008 presidential

campaign. But my cynicism is not merely about the office of President but about leadership *period*. Too many people who have gotten into leadership positions have turned out not only to be disappointing, but to be primarily interested in serving themselves and helping themselves to the public's means and wealth. America hasn't suffered the obvious corruption of elected officials that is constantly in the news in other countries, but our great corporations have dipped into our pockets without mercy and without shame—all because we have terrible leaders.

The people of ancient Judea, where the Christmas Story unfolds, lived in a chaotic time when leaders and puppets and usurpers and emperors and dictators used the people like pawns. The King Herod the Great of our story was an egotistic maniac who spent public money like water to build monuments to himself like Saddam Hussein. His son, also named Herod, was a murderer and an adulterer—and pathologically jealous of his power under the true leader, the Emperor in Rome who used *him* like a toy. You will remember this younger Herod as the one who tried to rub out the infant Jesus, after the Wise Men came seeking to honor him, by having *all the male children* under the age of two in Bethlehem mercilessly killed.

It is no wonder that the people longed for, ached for a leader, a rescuer, a savior— someone like ancient King David, and hoped and prayed that God would perpetuate *his* line and send a new King that cared about his people.

But a baby? How *long* can Hope *live*? Long enough for an infant to grow up, and learn the difference between good and evil, and survive, and somehow take charge and change the world for the better? Even by our lights, in hindsight, **it is astonishing** to think that God's plan to change the world, to rescue the world from its own evil and excesses, to *save the world*, would be accomplished by the birth of a baby. No matter how much or how little you put your trust in Jesus Christ, it takes a real “leap of faith” to put your trust in this baby.

There is something **even more astonishing** about the Christmas Story, even though it is sprinkled into all of our beloved Christmas Carols and written all over the Good Book. This is no merely human child, but a child of divine promise, a Child whose mother was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit of God, a Child who was born in the image of a man but also with the nature of God Himself. Christians do not say that Jesus was a good man, or a man who became so spiritually advanced that he somehow climbed above his peers. Christian faith says that Jesus was born as God in the flesh: God the Eternal Spirit infused into the bones and genes and tissue of an innocent helpless child. God with us. St. John says that “the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory.”

Every possible kind of term and idea and picture language has been used to say this. All of them fail to describe it well enough—probably because it is so astonishing. And it remains a stumbling block for Jews and Muslims and countless others. God is Spirit. How could God possible inhabit the body of a child, with flesh and blood, who cries and pukes and messes his diaper? How could any creature *be* the Creator of all things? That's astonishing!

If this were a theology class or a Bible Study I would try out various explanations, several well-honed lessons about this miracle. In a moment or two here, let me just tell you about my faith. If God is truly the God of all above all, then there is *nothing* God cannot do. But I am no philosopher, and that is not the footing on which my faith rests. My faith rests on what I know from the Bible itself, that the God we worship—the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, of King David and Israel's prophets over all the centuries—the God who loves and forgives and redeems like a patient father waiting for his children to come home: this God is also a God who cannot be predicted, who does not behave according to human philosophy, who can be sneaky, and surprising, and who

encounters humanity when we are least looking for it.

So God appeared to Moses in a bush which was on fire but didn't burn up. God appeared to Elijah, not in a whirlwind or fierce storm but in a still small voice. God appeared to Abraham as a trio of men walking across the desert in search of hospitality. God appeared to Isaac as a total stranger in the middle of the night who wrestled with him and threw his hip out of joint. There are countless unusual, even *wacky* stories in the Scriptures. They are all picture language, to remind us that God comes to us when and where we least expect it, in ways not of our choosing, not in accord with what *impresses* us the most, but what *moves* us.

Of course, we do have a bit of a fantastical story here, with the sky somehow splitting open or some heavenly beings popping into the sky from nowhere to sing anthems announcing God's great news in Bethlehem. But the "special effects" of angels and their songs is not the point, for they deliver the message not to kings or rulers or houses of parliament. They deliver God's astonishing news to some ordinary shepherds encamped in the fields with their flocks of sheep. They are keeping watch for predators, not for God Almighty! And yet the messengers of God come to them *because they are ordinary, working-class, common, unpretentious people* who are not jaded by power or fame or jealousy or wealth. And the message of God is that the *longings of ordinary people* are about to be fulfilled, and the world of *ordinary people* is about to change forever!

So God comes *precisely* in a way that big shots, superstars, kings and presidents and leaders *would never suspect*, and would not notice, and could not stop. God's power comes into the world, *Almighty God comes into the world*, not in such a way as to satisfy philosophers or impress the shakers and movers, but in order to redeem the people.

Can you believe that? Have you ever thought of *how* the Divine "steals into" the world? Does it give your spiritual eye a clearer vision of what life is like, and what its true purpose is? Maybe you don't think of yourself as particularly *insightful*. And maybe your native cynicism about politics, and the economy, and popular culture, and health, has somehow spilled over into cynicism about God. Maybe you've virtually stopped believing in God Almighty, and put your tired faith in lottery tickets, or internet deals that sound too good to be true.

I cannot split the heavens open for you. Our choir is not big and grand enough to be the choir of heavenly angels. We don't have any special effects like the so-called Crystal Cathedral.

But I will tell you something **just as astonishing** as the message that God would save the world by sending a tiny baby in a feed box lined with straw; **just as astonishing** as the idea that God can enter our material world *in the flesh*, incognito, *in surprises and breaches and even "sneaky" ways* that only common folks and smelly shepherds would notice.

What is **this astonishing thing**? That, because of Christmas, *now* we understand. Now we see and grasp God's real plan in the world, *to work through you and me*. God came once *in the flesh* of an innocent and holy Child of promise, Jesus Christ the Lord. And Christ will come again, at the end of time (whatever that means). But the most astonishing and empowering and energizing and moving and wonderful thing of all is that Christ has chosen us to be his body in the world today.

Martin Luther was fond of saying that Christians are called to be *little Christs*. Our role in the Divine Plan—and God may be full of surprises and unpredictable and sneak up on humanity in ways we couldn't imagine, *but there is a Divine Plan*. And our role in that Divine Plan is to be the body of Christ and to bear the image of Jesus' life into a world which is just as discouraged as ever and just as much longing for a true leader, a rescuer, a savior, as ever.

In the Christmas Gospel, I think the full picture of these shepherd guys gets overlooked. They heard voices and music—it sounds fantastical and maybe it's only picture language. But they got the message that something big, important, colossal, was happening in the nearby village. And

then they did two things. First they went and checked it out, and found the holy Child as they had been told. And then they returned to *their daily lives* – yes, praising God, yes, telling the story, yes, spreading the news, but they returned to their daily lives. They didn't become monks or preachers, politicians or televangelists. They continued to do the work they did. Just as we return to our daily lives.

God's plan to change the world and to save the world is worked through ordinary people who are first changed by what they see and hear.

Say all you want about the “crass commercialism” into which Christmas has fallen. That's a sad part of our rampant capitalism, I guess. But what lies beneath is still as true as ever. People see that Jesus is God's most precious gift to the world. We see our world and our life differently now, through the eyes of gratitude.

This afternoon it was my privilege to carry \$600 worth of gift cards from this congregation to the young, formerly abandoned, abused or homeless, kids living at the Jeff Griffith Youth Center in Hollywood. This is just one small way in which we have helped to change the world according to God's plan. Every week we give away groceries and staples to the poor and hungry, to people who are at wit's end about how to make it, and we do this to change the world according to God's plan. Every concert, every potluck, every time we open our doors to a community group or an acting group or a recovery group, we are changing the world according to God's plan.

We see what life can be for others now, through the eyes of generosity. We are changed by what we see and hear, changed by what we have received at Christmas, and we change the world by what we give of ourselves. This is Christmas – the Nativity of all that is good and precious and holy and divine, life-giving and redeeming, world-changing, God-glorifying, peace-making and gift-giving, all wrapped up in the same swaddling clothes of Christmas. Give thanks for God's great gift to us. Give this gift to others. Amen.