

Our Christmas Gift Luke 1:16-35, 38; 2:1-20  
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – Christmas Eve 2011 (11:00 p.m. worship)

First, there was the angel Gabriel who visited Mary. He told her of the wonderful, mysterious things that were to happen unto her. ***“Let it be done unto me according to your word,”*** said the innocent first disciple of the One she would birth. And the angel departed.

Then, in the fullness of time, Mary gave birth to the Holy One she had carried, making her – as some religious call her – ***Theotokis (Mother of God.)*** And the shepherds came and explained all that had been told to them about the birth of this child. “And Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”

**Mary showed us the way to this place tonight. But we are not Mary. We did not have her experiences. Indeed, all we have done is ponder those passages of scripture that tell us about her experiences. But they ARE her experiences, not ours.**

The Shepherds were keeping the night watch over the flocks in the field. And then the angel of the Lord came upon them, and so terrifying was the experience that the first words out of the angel’s mouth were: ***“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of a great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”***

And based upon that event (along with a chorus sung by the heavenly host) they did not convene a focus group, nor turn to

CNN, MSNBC, or FOX to see what it all meant. Rather, they took action and went to the manger in Bethlehem, where they found something pretty amazing.

The Shepherds showed us the way to this place tonight. But we are not the Shepherds. We did not have their experiences. Indeed, all we have done is ponder those passages of scripture that tell us about their experiences. But they ARE their experiences, not ours.

The medieval Lutheran born sage Angelus Silesius once opined: **What does it profit me if Gabriel hails the virgin, unless he brings to me the same tidings?**

We can meditate upon the accounts of scripture we have heard, but it is **IN OUR EXPERIENCES** that God wishes to **GIFT US**.

There's an old story of the disciples who gathered around their master, who taught them all about the REALITIES OF GOD. When he finished, he asked, **"Do you understand?"** And his disciples answered, **"No."**

So he introduced them to the MYSTERY OF GOD'S PRESENCE, and after telling them so very much, he asked, **"Now, do you understand?"** And his disciples answered, **"No."**

In desperation, the Master spun tales of wonders of God performed throughout the ages. When he finished, he was exhausted from the exhilaration of the Spirit. **He hesitantly**

**asked them once more.** And, hanging their heads, the replied once more, **“We don’t get it.”**

The Master grew quiet. Then out of the silence he began to sing – a haunting melody of yearning, or longing for God. The disciples’ heads began to rise. Their speech merged together, each voice attuned to the longing of the song. The Master did not even ask the question. It was plain to all who were present: **they got it.**

The wonders of the ages, the experiences of others, the loftiest theological principles are all for naught, unless they have entered into our experience. Unless they are the words to the song that we sing ourselves.

My sister-in-law called my wife and told her about a mutual friend’s recitation of what the preacher’s sermon was about this past Sunday. **“That,”** she said, **“is what you want – when people in the pew go out and tell other people what their preacher said.”** She meant it as a description of effective preaching. But what she was really talking about was **the word from the pulpit taking on flesh in the pew, and becoming the experience of the person listening.**

- What she was talking about was **INCARNATION.**
- What she was talking about is **like Mary experiencing and pondering.**

- What she was talking about is like Shepherds experiencing and sharing.

And so what can we say – not about what we followed here, BUT about what we have as OUR EXPERIENCE, what we sing as OUR SONG?

We need to be real and honest. There are stories we have heard. And there is the reality we experience.

Reality we experience at at least three levels: (1) the physical, (2) the social, and (3) the spiritual levels.

The first two – physical and social occupy most of our awareness and consume most of our resources. Just think about how much attention you have paid to the **physicality of your body**: bathing, clothing, eating, eliminating, medicating, etc.

And how much attention do you pay to the social: getting from place to place for work, school, talking, shopping, planning, budgeting, etc.

We have, by necessity, **become experts in navigating these arenas in our lives.** And, for the past few weeks, they have probably been operating on “overload status.”

The spiritual reality, the spiritual experience, however, can be caught *only in wispy glimpses*, and then *require meditation to attend to it in any sustained manner.* The spiritual

encounters **require** the *luxury of unplanned, unfettered, quiet moments* where the physical and the social can be interrupted.

**Tonight** – in **this place**, and at **this time** – **THIS** is **God's Gift to us.**

Certainly, not only tonight, in this place, at this time.

But, almost assuredly, it has a better chance of breaking through than at any other time.

We are finished with just about all the physical and social requirements for Christmas. If it's not done by now, we have accepted the reality that it's not going to happen. There's a certain resignation to this hour.

And, in that frame of mind, we can see and receive what we quite often are unable to accept at other times.

The GIFT that God has for us in Christmas can be better received right now than at any other place.

Than at any other time.

Even in the fatigue that some are now experiencing, THIS is the moment of SPIRITUAL REALITY.

- **It is a Gift.**
- **From God.**
- **To us.**

- **For us.**

**Here** – [taking the bread out of the manger and walking among the congregation] – **we see and experience in the NOW what happened then.**

The gift **CAME** to a manger – a food trough.

The gift **CAME** to Bethlehem – which means “Town of Bread.”

It **CAME** wrapped in swaddling cloths.

**The Gift** was for a hungry world – and it feeds us.

**The Gift** feeds our Physical, Social, and Spiritual needs.

**The Gift** is for us. Not someone else’s experience. But ours.

Whatever is your past, whatever brought you here, whatever is on your horizon ... once a year, in this time, in this place, the space between the present and the eternal is so very, very thin, that a sliver of a moment will become your experience and will be your gift. And it will be sufficient. It will be enough. Receive it now. And chew upon it – not as Mary’s nor as the shepherds’ but as your very own. The tag reads thusly:

TO: My

Beloved Child

FROM: God

Merry Christmas.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
AMEN.