

More Than a Memory John 1:1-14
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – Christmas Eve 2011 (11:00 p.m. worship)

It was a cold December afternoon. Rain mixed with snow splashed against the windshield. Overhead dark clouds hovered seemingly just above the treetops. All day long two men, a **pastor named Jerry** and a **layman named Jim**, had been delivering Christmas boxes. Many of the families who would receive these boxes would get nothing else for Christmas that year. The pickup truck had been loaded when the two men started out on their journey but now, only one box remained. It was covered with an old piece of tarp to protect it against the rain.

The address on the card meant a drive of several miles beyond the city limit. **"What do you think?"** Jim asked. He was the driver and it was his truck. **Pastor Jerry** knew what Jim was thinking. **Why drive way out in the country when we could give this last box to someone close by and be home in thirty minutes? It was a tempting thought. Pastor Jerry had a Christmas Eve Communion Service scheduled for 8 p.m. and he could use the time to prepare.**

Jim, however, answered his own question, **"Well, let's give it a try. If we can't find the place, we can always come back and give the box to someone else."**

The rain was pouring down by the time they reached the address on the card. The old white framed house stood on a hillside

overlooking the valley. It had once been an elegant place, the centerpiece of a large farm. Now, the farm was gone and the house had deteriorated over the years.

The two men slipped and slid, huffed and puffed as they carried the box up the hill. The red clay offered no foothold and the box, wet from the rain, was beginning to come apart. They climbed the high steps to the porch, set the box down and slid it across the floor. They straightened up just in time to glimpse the face of a **small boy at the window**. He had been watching them coming up the hill. Now, he announced their arrival with shouts of excitement, **"They're here, Grandma, they're here!"**

The door opened and an older woman greeted them. Her gray hair was pulled back in a bun at the back of her neck. She had on a dark, plain dress with a white apron. She was drying her hands with a dishtowel and explained to them that she had been doing the supper dishes. **"I told you, they would come,"** a child's voice said from behind her. A little boy with black hair and bright dark eyes rushed to the box and began pulling at the goodies inside.

The woman told them that she and her grandson were all that was left of her family. The father and mother had divorced and gone their separate ways. The little boy had been left behind for Grandma to raise. She said, **"Oh, I am so glad you are here. He was up early this morning looking for you. He sat by that window all**

day. I wasn't sure you would come and I tried to prepare him in case of a disappointment. But he just said, 'Don't worry, Grandma, I know they will come.'

That young boy didn't know it, but, in a sense, he was speaking for all Christianity. A thankful people, more than one billion of us around the world, pause for a few moments at Christmas and pray, "We knew he would come."

For many, it's just the same old, same old. Just another Christmas to stick into the memory box, that will somehow over time be **enhanced and embellished by the memories, when a lifetime later they are looked back over.**

But – for some – it was, and is, more than just a memory. It was, and is, and experience.

I heard it once, then twice, and finally, on the third bleat, I got up to the window to look. Surely, someone had not really brought a donkey to the manger down in the courtyard, below my office window. But, I heard its bleat three times now. What was I going to do with a real live donkey? I lookd and saw nothing. I blinked my eyes a couple of times and then heard the mournful bleat of the donkey again. I lifted my eyes and saw it: it was the blad of the snow shovel on the front of the little urban tractor across the street at the Post Office. No donkey, at all. But it did make me wonder:

WHAT WOULD I DO IF A DONKEY BEARING THE PREGNANT MARY REALLY DID COME TO VISIT?

It was a few years back when this happened. But, it's stuck with me as more than just a memory of a snow blade. It's a question that visits me annually, about this time of year.

Back in days gone by, shepherds were minding their own business, when they had to encounter such a question, as well. It was not a snow blade, but a heavenly host that announced the question: What are you going to do about it?

They took some rather extraordinary action, leaving the sheep behind, and going into Bethlehem to check it out. What did they find? Well, actually it was all a rather ordinary tableau they encountered when they got to the stable. Indeed, if one had not heard the angels announce it, one might not even think to call it a tableau.

But they saw something different than the ordinariness of the father, mother, and baby in a stable. Artists for Christmas cards and for paintings through the ages have portrayed the Holy Family as all wearing haloes. That seems kind of hokey, but then again we are told that the Shepherds left this very, very ordinary stable "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen."

It wasn't just the memory of another ordinary set of circumstances. It was something quite extraordinary that they were able to perceive.

The Gospel of John tell us that this was the very Word of God, which was the very light of the world, that became flesh and dwelt among us.

That's pretty high faluting language for something so ordinary.

But even though it looked quite ordinary, there were some who were able to see something quite extraordinary wrapped in the stuff of ordinary life.

That's what Christmas is all about: divinity wrapped in humanity. As Saint Ireanaeus put it: God became human so that humans can become like God.

It really depends on what you are looking for.

I remember as a young parent, my children would sometimes invite me to see things that they had made: masterpieces on paper made with Crayons; exquisite caverns made of sheets and blankets hung over living room furniture. When I put on my "Daddy Vision" I was able to see things other than what ordinary eyes could see.

If Christmas for us is just a memory of one more family gathering, that will become **enhanced and embellished by the**

memories, when a lifetime later they are looked back over then that is probably all that we will see.

The Christmas season might be thought of as a house with three concentric rooms. In the outer room is the hustle and bustle of the secular Christmas. In the middle room is the piety of Christmas activities. Sometimes, it seems like those two rooms spend most of their energy fighting one another. (“Merry Christmas” versus “Happy Holidays.”) And many memories are formed by these two rooms.

But then, in the innermost room is the room where the LIGHT is actually experienced. Where the holy gives birth to human flesh – even to our flesh.

But this inner room is difficult to enter. It requires silence, emptiness, patience, listening and looking into darkness. And it requires the ability to be surprised.

But for those who will dare to enter, there can be experienced a light that is THE LIGHT of the world, and which will change how everything else is seen. It is here that we look into the eyes of the babe born in the manger and find ourselves looking into a mirror.

For those – who make the time and

- hear the sound of a snow blade that just might be a bleating donkey; or

- encounter a lit Christmas tree in the dark of the living room when the other lights are turned off and everyone else is in bed, and consider how God might indeed be lighting their soul in a beautiful way; or
- persevere and become the Promised One to someone who waits in darkness;

then the Light of the World might indeed become flesh once more ... even in us ... and become more than just a memory, but indeed a real God experience.

Can it happen? Can you make time and space for such a thing to surprise you.

The **shepherds** did. **John the Gospel writer** did. **Jim** and **Jerry** did.

It CAN happen! Will you make time and space for such a thing to surprise you.

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