

“Tell Me Again” – Luke 2:1-14 – Christmas Eve, 2003

Christmas certainly is a special time for a child, isn't it? There are so many touching, heart-warming images of children at this time of year. Wide eyes, looking often with suspicion, usually with awe at an imposing man with white whiskers and a red suit. Sparkling eyes looking at a beautifully-decorated tree as the lights are turned on. Fingers twitching near a table full of Christmas baking. Oh yes, Christmas is a very special time for children ... especially for that child within each one of us. Now don't tell me there isn't a child inside each and every one of you ... I know better! Inside each one of us is that child we know so well, and who wonders what has happened! Christmas is a very special time for children, and for that child in you.

One of the neat things about children is that they do not try to act like adults. I know that sounds a bit trite, but it's really both true and somewhat profound. Children, unlike adults, tend to let their emotions shine forth, not worrying about what other people might think. Emotional restraint is part of all that stuff we learn later. For example, when children like someone, they're not afraid to show that liking (and the same is true for the opposite – can you remember getting that 'special' last-minute piece of advice from your mother just before some relative you didn't like appeared at the door?!). And that's true for more than just people. When children like a story, they love to listen to that story over and over again, reliving it, not worried for a moment that someone might say, "you've heard that story already!" A young child will come to you with their favourite story book in hand, and nestle on your lap, and stick that well-worn favourite book in your hands, and with sparkling and eager eyes, ask, "tell me this story again!" (Sometimes they'll even remember to say 'please', but you can easily tell from the expression on their face that they really, really mean 'please')

So let's put those two things, Christmas, and a child's desire to hear their favourite story again, let's put those two things together. Let the child in you run free for a few minutes. Pretend you are curling up in the most favourite lap you can remember, and I'll tell you a favourite story.

A long time ago, in a distant land occupied by a foreign army, the Emperor (that's kind of like a king) told everyone that they had to go to register their names in a book. A young woman, who was almost ready to have a baby, and her fiancé (the man to whom she was engaged) set out to go to a small town named Bethlehem, because his family came from there. It was a long and hard journey, and when they arrived all the hotels and motels were full. One kindly innkeeper offered them the use of his stable, and tired as they were, they gladly accepted. People today who aren't farmers say, "Yuck!" when they hear about them having to stay in a stable, but those who are familiar with farms know that a stable can be a wonderful place, especially on a cold night. This young couple, Joseph and Mary were their names, they were used to stables, and this one was warm and smelled of sweet hay. There were other animal smell there as well, but that was ok, too.

While they were staying in that stable, it was time for the baby to be born, and young Mary gave birth to a baby boy. Even though it was in a somewhat unusual place, it was a normal birth, and they were filled with joy at the arrival of a brand-new baby boy. His tired mother carefully dried him off, and wrapped him up in soft cloths, and laid him gently in the soft, sweet-smelling hay. A perfectly ordinary, totally human birth, a birth with which we can all relate, since there is not one person in this room that was not born!

And yet while it was a perfectly normal, quite unremarkable birth, it was at the same time a birth unlike any other. A birth so different from any other that even heaven couldn't keep quiet about it. Why the angel of the Lord picked on some poor shepherds hanging out on a hillside we'll never know, but he just had to tell them the good news about this special birth. An ordinary birth, and yet a birth so very unique that even the glory of the Lord lit up that hillside as the angel told them just how special this baby was, a Saviour, the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord. And with that pronouncement of a

unique and incredible action of grace by God all heaven let loose with celebration – a multitude of the heavenly host praising God as we are told. The shepherds were stunned by this display, but they quickly recovered, and went into Bethlehem to visit with the new baby. They were the first in a long series of people who would come to pay their respects to this totally unique child, the son of Mary, the Son of God.

The end. Well, not really the end, for the story went on, and indeed still goes on this very night. But that's the favourite story, the story of a birth. So simple, and yet so profound. The birth of a baby, just like you and me, and yet a baby who was one with God, who provided the way to reconnect with, to reconcile with God for you, and for me, and for all who would listen. It is a wondrous story of a child, for the child in us. It is the story of God's grace, a story so wondrous that over and over again we come together on Christmas Eve, and say, "tell me again, please".

Thanks and all praise be to God who gave us this story, a story of redemption and forgiveness, in the birth of the Christ Child, our Lord, Jesus.