

Christmas Eve 2023 Luke 2:1-20

This is my twelfth Christmas Eve as a pastor, my forty sixth Christmas Eve as a person. So I imagine I've read the second chapter of Luke's gospel hundreds of times in my life. And that thought led to the discussion I had this week with the other pastors that we really have an impossible task to sit down to write Christmas Eve sermons—for some of us, the second sermon of the day—and to try to think of something to say that we haven't said before and that you haven't heard before.

But then, I decorated my Christmas tree. It had been up in the corner with the lights on it for over a week, but the ornaments were still in the box because I hadn't had a free evening when I could make hot chocolate and listen to Christmas music and take my time decorating. It occurred to me that, although I do have a new ornament to put on the tree this year, what I was most looking forward to was seeing all of the old ornaments that I've been taking out of tissue paper and shoe boxes every Christmas for 20, 30, 40 years. There's something about hanging those same ornaments every year, or listening to the same songs, or cooking the same recipes, or watching the same Christmas movies, whether that's *White Christmas* or *It's a Wonderful Life* or *Die Hard*.

And so I got to thinking that perhaps you didn't come here tonight to hear me say something new. Maybe you came because you wanted to hear the same story we hear every year about the angels, the shepherds, and the manger; you came to light candles and sing *Silent Night*. And yes, one explanation for our desire to do what we've always done is nostalgia and the warm familiarity of keeping traditions. But what if we've turned these stories and songs into traditions because somewhere, deep down, we understand how much we need to hear them, over and over again?

The Christmas story doesn't change: Mary and Joseph always travel to Bethlehem on the eve of Jesus' birth; the inn is always full; the angels always terrify the shepherds in the fields, and the shepherds always rejoice to find the baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. The story never changes because God's love never changes, and God's promise to be present with us that was fulfilled through Jesus' birth is forever and always ours.

So we celebrate tonight, as we have celebrated for centuries, and as I trust those who come after us will continue to celebrate for centuries more, not a new story, a new promise, or a new possibility, but the coming of the Ancient of Days, whose infinite love existed before our world began and will live on forever after. We celebrate God coming to us because that good news bears repeating this Christmas and every Christmas and every day in between. Whatever else we may do this year, be it old traditions or new adventures, the great story of God's love remains the same: *the Word became flesh and lived among us*. God is here; let us rejoice!