

A young and successful executive was traveling down a neighborhood street on his way going home, going a bit too fast in his new luxury car. As he passed a young boy, a brick smashed into the car's side door! He slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the car to confront the child that had thrown the brick. The young boy was in tears. "Please, mister please, I'm sorry but I didn't know what else to do," he said. "I threw the brick because no one else would stop." With tears dripping down his face and off his chin, the youth pointed to a spot just behind a parked car. "It's my brother; he rolled off the curb and fell out of his wheelchair and I can't lift him up." Now sobbing, the boy asked the stunned executive, "Would you please help me get him back into his wheelchair? He's hurt and he's too heavy for me." Moved beyond words, the driver hurriedly lifted the crippled boy back into his wheelchair, then took out his handkerchief and dabbed at the fresh scrapes and cuts. A quick look told him everything was going to be okay. "Thank you and may God bless you sir," the grateful child told the stranger. Too shook up for words, the man simply watched as the boy pushed his wheelchair-bound brother down the sidewalk toward their home. The driver turned to look at his car; the damage was noticeable, but upon reflection, the driver decided to never repair that dented side door. He decided to keep the dent there to remind him of what he had just learned that evening: "Don't go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention!"

Tonight my friends, we approach the final moments of our preparation for the celebration of the birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ. I don't know about you, but for me it seems that this has been a very short and intense season of preparation. It feels like I, along with my bride, have been running a race in getting ready for Christmas; buying the food, getting and wrapping the presents, planning the meals, cleaning the house, attending the parties, decorating the inside and outside of our home, conducting worship services, writing homilies, decorating the church. The list goes on and on, and while these activities have been successfully completed for the most part, in doing so, I have to confess that I have reached this night feeling somewhat exhausted and ready for it all to be over. I have this sense of being more thankful for having reached this point, than I am for the gift of the birth of the one who makes it all possible. In short, I am closer to being like the young executive on his way home than I am comfortable with – and I certainly don't want God throwing a brick at me in order to get my attention.

To be fair, the preparation for Christmas is a time when we can and do involve ourselves in much emotion and remembrance, and this can help slow us down. Our memories rush back to Christmases gone by. As we dig out the ornaments to decorate the tree, we are surprised again to see them and to remember where we got this one, and where that one came from. Wonderful memories of those times, and the people who were part of them flood our minds. The music at this time of year fills us with memories. And the food, Ah, the food! We all have pictures in our minds about food and the sweets and the goodies we consume at this time of the year. All of this and a lot of other activities become part of the annual ritual of celebration of this festival of Christmas. They help us to remember, but what we tend to remember is what we have been involved with, and not what the season is really all about. We need to go back and remember why we celebrate this night. Christmas can and should signify a new and fresh beginning for each and every one of us; a fresh new start in grace made possible by a gift from God that we

could not earn on our own. We can go back; we can and should return to that night long ago, and truly appreciate what happened.

So my friends, walk with me in your imagination for the next few moments to that night long ago when two exhausted travelers, one heavy with child, approached Bethlehem looking for a space to spend the night. It was almost the longest night of the year, in the dead of winter. A small group of shepherds were hunkered down in the fields outside of Bethlehem with their flocks of sheep. Earth seemed silent and closed; nothing was moving. Then, suddenly, an angel appeared unto them announcing good tidings and great joy; that unto them was born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. Additional heavenly hosts descended from heaven. Those heavenly hosts, the angels of judgment who had become an angelic choir, raised their voices in glorious volume singing about peace and good will toward men, and giving glory and praise to God. And on earth, the poorest of the poor, the first to hear the glorious news, rejoiced in the moment of redemption, the moment "so long awaited..." Then the music stopped, and the light faded. Stillness and night once again overtook the Judean hills.

What took place on that most Holy Night of cosmic redemption was a worship service. It was the first Christian service. It was the night the Christian Church was born. It was a heavenly service, complete with a choir. The congregation was a group of humble shepherds. An angel spoke the first sermon, admonishing those poor trembling shepherds to "Fear not, for behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy!" He came to proclaim the Gospel - the Good News that Jesus Christ had come - the long expected Messiah and King had just entered this world of humanity and made his residence among men. "A Savior is born - He is Christ the Lord!" Those social outcasts, those poverty stricken people, those spiritually starved men and women, heard a message that night that has continued down to this very night. Jesus Christ is born in Bethlehem. He is the Savior of the world. O come, let us adore Him!

The name Bethlehem means the "House of Bread", and tonight for the next few minutes this church will become our "House of Bread". This will be our Bethlehem. There will be no traffic jams, no shopping trips, no hectic running around trying to get too many things done. Tonight, there is no more appropriate place for us to be gathered together than in this "House of Bread" where in a few moments, you and I will be participants in a sumptuous Christmas meal in which the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ will be our food and drink. The words of hope given to the shepherds and to the whole world will also be ours: our Savior has come. Ready or not, Christmas is here! It is time to surrender ourselves and our lives, all that we are and all that we have, to the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. He is Lord of lords, King of kings, and God of gods. Tonight, my friends, is a night of grace. It is a night of new beginnings. This night honors a Savior who has been born unto us! Let us take a deep breath or two, and put everything out of our mind except an image of this baby boy, lying in a manger, who has come to lead us home. Tonight, let us come and adore Him!

Amen.