

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. 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..."

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 entered this world of humanity to make his residence among men. "A Savior is born - He is Christ the Lord!"

A similar story is told in the tale of the tablecloth. A brand new priest and his wife had arrived early in October to their first ministry, the reopening of a church in suburban Brooklyn. When they saw their church, it was very run down and needed much work. They set a goal to have everything done in time to have their first service on Christmas Eve. They worked hard, and on December 18th they were ahead of schedule and just about finished. But on December 19, a driving rainstorm hit the area that lasted for two days. A leak developed in the roof over the sanctuary causing a large area of plaster about 20 feet by 8 feet to fall off the rear wall of the sanctuary just behind the pulpit, beginning about head high. There was no way to repair the damage prior to Christmas Eve; the pastor cleaned up the mess on the floor, and resigned to having to postpone the Christmas Eve service, headed home. On the way, he noticed that a local business was having a flea market sale for charity, so he stopped in. One of the items was a beautiful, handmade, ivory colored tablecloth with exquisite work, vibrant colors, and a Cross embroidered right in the center. It was just the right size to cover up the damage in the sanctuary wall, so he bought it and headed back to the church to hang it.

By this time it had started to snow. An older woman trying to catch a bus had just missed it. The pastor invited her to wait in the warm church for the next bus to come. She sat in a pew and watched as the pastor put up the tablecloth as a wall tapestry. It covered up the entire problem area; the pastor could hardly believe how beautiful it looked. Then he noticed the woman walking down the center aisle. Her face was like a sheet. "Pastor," she asked, "where did you get that tablecloth?" The pastor explained. The woman asked him to check the lower right corner to see if the initials, EBG were crocheted into it there. They were. These were the initials of the woman, who had made this tablecloth 35 years before, in Austria. The woman explained that before the war she and her husband were well-to-do people in Austria. When the Nazis came, her husband forced her to leave, promising to follow her shortly thereafter. He was captured, sent to a prison camp and she never saw her husband or her home again. The pastor wanted to give her the tablecloth, but she made him keep it for the church. The pastor insisted on driving her to her home on the other side of Staten Island, as she was only in Brooklyn for the day for a housecleaning job.

They had a wonderful service at the newly opened church on Christmas Eve; the church was almost full, the music and the spirit were great, and many people indicated at the end of the service that they would be returning on a regular basis. One older man, whom the pastor recognized from the neighborhood, continued to sit in one of the pews and stare after everyone else had left. The man finally asked him where he got the tablecloth on the rear wall because it was identical to one that his wife had made years ago when they lived in Austria before the war. He told the pastor how the Nazis had come, how he had forced his wife to flee for her safety, and how he had been arrested and put in a prison. He returned after the war to find her, but failing in that, he had emigrated to the US. The pastor asked him if he would allow him to take him for a little ride. They drove to Staten Island and to the same building where the pastor had taken the woman three days earlier. He helped the man climb the three flights of stairs to the woman's apartment, knocked on the door, and saw the greatest Christmas reunion one could ever imagine!

The similarities between these two situations are striking to me. Both involved worship services of a unique and striking character. Both occurred under less than ideal conditions and places. Both involved mainly the poorest of the poor, people with little to their credit, and little to look forward to with hope and joy. And most importantly, both pointed to the main conclusion I want to leave you with tonight, that God was and is caring for us in the midst of the pain and trials and tribulations that seem to dog almost all of us. God loves us with an inexhaustible love, and despite outward appearances, it is particularly so in times of trouble. In these times of cultural and physical attacks on Christianity, of declining belief and practice on the part of people who call themselves Christians, and on the artificiality of everything attached to the season devoted to the birth of Christ, it is hard to see Christmas for what it should be. Christmas is for suffering people, people with real sins and real hurts. If there weren't any sins, there wouldn't be any suffering. If there weren't any suffering, there wouldn't be any need for Christmas. That's why

Jesus came; sin and suffering had taken over the world, and He was here to absorb and endure the suffering that sin causes in our world. He was here to take it into himself, so that we would not suffer endlessly, without hope. There was love and care and hope wrapped in those swaddling clothes. Love for our Heavenly Father's creation; care for His hurting people; hope for those with grief, waiting for relief. It came in the person of that little child, Jesus Christ, through whom we would become God's beloved children.

The name "Bethlehem" means the House of Bread. Tonight, for the next few minutes, this church will be our House of Bread. This will be our Bethlehem where we will meet the child Jesus. There will be no traffic jams, no shopping trips, no hectic running around trying to get too many things done. In a few moments, you and I will be participants in the latest and ongoing version of that first worship service; we will partake of 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 be ours tonight: our Savior has come. It will be 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 a Savior is 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.