

This month I am preaching a series of sermons on the topics:

Where Christ Came, How Christ Came, Why Christ Came.

My intention is to help us consider the Christmas story in fresh ways, because it has become so familiar to us that it is easy to take it for granted.

Over familiarity robs this season of its true power and potential.

Over familiarity dulls the meaning and diminishes the surprise.

It is a story that remains the same year after year after year.

We know all about the coming of Christ into the world, and because we already know what we know, the story does not shock, astonish, unsettle us anymore.

But it should, for Advent is an unsettling season.

It is astonishing to consider just what God did in Jesus Christ.

The season of Advent with its anticipation and waiting beckons us to pause and see the world in fresh ways.

This event we anticipate has the power to make us innocent and new.

To suspend our criticism and cynicism for just a little while and feel like children again, to bask in the mystery and wonder of it all.

And during this mysterious, magical time of year particularly we encounter the vulnerability of God, the tenderness of God, the sweetness of God.

So today I want to talk about Where Christ Came.

In real estate, location is everything. It has always been so.

If you ever get to Jerusalem you can walk on the ground where King Herod built his fabulous, opulent palace.

You can see right where the 3 Kings came to ask Herod about the birth of a King.

Herod's palace is now gone, but archaeologists tell us about the scope, size, and grandeur from the foundations which are still intact.

This was only one of Herod's palaces, he had several.

All were opulent, with sunken gardens and swimming pools built with slave labor.

Then as now, people of wealth and position lived lavishly.

Their residences were symbols of their power, wealth, authority and control.

They were in the best locations money could buy.

Therefore, it is no surprise that visitors from the East, wanting to discover the newborn King would head straight for Herod's palace in Jerusalem.

That is precisely where royalty would be born.

But not in this case.

Instead, they had to travel down to tiny Bethlehem, 6 miles south of Jerusalem. And where in Bethlehem, specifically, is it believed that this King came into the world? Not in one of Herod's vacation homes.

Not even in clean and warm and comfortable surroundings at all.

No, most likely he was born in a cave, where some animals were stabled.

Now I know our Nativity Scenes depict a barn, but most likely it was a cave. Christian apologist Justin Martyr, writing in about 155 AD said that the Holy family took refuge in a cave outside of Bethlehem, and this was confirmed in the writings of Origen of Alexandria.

Of course we will never know with precision or have historical verification.

Only Matthew and Luke have birth narratives,

Mark and John do not even mention the birth of Jesus at all.

The first and original birth story was written by Matthew, however Luke's account is the one we are most familiar with because it is more poetic, lyrical, and it forms the basis of our annual Christmas pageants, so we like it the best.

Therefore, my sermon series this year will be based upon Luke's Gospel, and the text for today is Luke 2:15-16:

“As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherds talked it over: Let's go over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us.” They left running, and found Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing.”

Luke's account differs in some significant ways from Matthew's, for while Matthew suggests that Mary and Joseph were probably residents of Bethlehem, Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph were residents of Nazareth and had to come down to Bethlehem because of a census, mandated when Quirinius was governor of Syria. This census required that all of the decedents of King David had to return to their ancestral homeland to be enrolled.

From Nazareth, this would have been a trip of 100 miles, taken by very pregnant Mary on a donkey. It would have taken at least 7 days.

Luke tells us that when they arrived there were thousands and thousands of people already in Bethlehem, and no room anywhere for this young couple to find a place to welcome their firstborn child.

So they went outside of the city, found a cave or some sort of shelter, and there God entered human history.

Nothing about it was distinguished, regal or stunning.

It was lonely, frightening, cold, and messy.

Such a strange beginning, in a strange place for the birth of someone supposedly so significant.

And yet in that story lies the essential truth of **where** Jesus first came,
 And **where** he comes still.
 He comes to us on the margins, in the boundaries,
 outside of our expectations and our plans.
 He hides in obscure places, and
 if we are not careful we can miss him altogether.
 In my life Christ has always come in ways both subtle and surprising.

He comes in those moments when we are most vulnerable and reachable.
 Sometimes in our weakest moments, when self-sufficiency no longer works,
 Sometimes in our longing and loneliness, when our hearts are laid bare and we
 have nowhere left to turn and nobody left to turn to.
 He comes when we are broken and battered.
 He comes when we are defeated and disillusioned.
 He comes when we think life is just too hard and we can't take it anymore.

He comes into the messiness, the ordinariness of life.
 He comes not just in the rarefied atmosphere of the Sanctuary,
 but in the lonely halls of the hospital.
 Not just in the great cathedrals,
 but in the county jail and the homeless shelter.

How ironic it is that in all of the bombardment of images we get from the media about what Christmas means and does for us, you would easily assume that Christmas is for the well off, the lucky and the strong. Christmas has been successfully marketed as a holiday for the blessed. A holiday to celebrate wealth, friendship, success, happiness. And it is all of that, certainly, but it is also something else.

Writes Bishop Melvin Wheatley:

“What is there to celebrate in the midst of affluence if you are poor?
 In the midst of family reunions, if you have been rejected or disowned?
 In the midst of love when you feel unlovable?
 What is there to celebrate about the sparkling eyes of children,
 when you are trying to deal with the deep scars of your own childhood?
 About angel choruses of peace on earth when you are a long way from home,

fighting a war. What is there to celebrate?
Well, nothing if Christmas is only reserved for the lighthearted and the lucky.”

Now if you are among the lighthearted and lucky—be thankful!
Christmas is a holiday to celebrate abundance and blessing.
But Christmas is also for the outcast and the outsider, and that is the significance
of where Jesus first came.

Advent is an unsettling season.
It is unsettling because it reminds us **where** God first came,
And where God comes still.
Into poverty, obscurity, into struggle and sorrow; the messiness of human life
in all it’s dimensions.
There is a line in a poem which has stayed with me through the years:
“Nothing that is human is foreign to me.”
That could be God’s message to us. “Nothing that is human is foreign to me.”
Nothing. In all of it there is redemption and grace.

There was a public school in the south that displayed a big photo of Jesus in the
front entryway.

It was really offensive to the non-Christian kids, teachers, and parents
And had to be taken down.

Now, I have to say that I agree that it **should** have been taken down.
A public school should never display pictures of any religious figure.
Not Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, or Jesus.
So I agree with that decision.

But the article I read about this made me sad. It quoted one kid as saying:
“I’m not a Christian and when I see that picture of Jesus every day
when I come to school, it makes me feel just like an outcast.”

Jesus was the biggest outcast who ever lived.
Jesus was an outcast so that we wouldn’t have to be.
Jesus was born to outcasts,
in the most humble, obscure place on earth. He was always on the outside.
That is where he came and where he comes even now.
Let’s be watching and waiting for Him during this unsettling season.

(Some ideas from The Unsettling Season, by Don Shelby)

