

God with us, help us to see you in the people and places in our lives where you show up unexpectedly. Amen.

A few Christmases ago, I was picking up some last-minute holiday supplies at the closest Super Target.

About halfway through my shopping list, I heard a kid singing. I couldn't make out the words or the tune but this child was obviously happy. Her voice was carrying across half the store. As I got closer to the checkout, her voice got clearer – it turns out this girl and her mother were in front of me in line. The child could not have been more than 5 years old. She was singing the same song over and over again.

It was *O Holy Night*. She knew all the words.

Her mom told me that she kept singing through the song because she wanted to help everybody get in the Christmas spirit.

What better way to be reminded of the birth of a baby than in the song of a child?

O night divine, o night when Christ was born!

That girl wasn't singing about frosty sleigh rides or silver jingle bells or Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer. She was singing about the true meaning of Christmas. She was spreading joy by singing about the birth of our Lord.

All us shoppers were worried about ribbons and wrappings!

We were worried about tinsel, and trimmings and trappings!

But Christmas, we know, can't be bought in a store.

Because Christmas, we know, means a little bit more.

On *this* holy night, we remember that Jesus was born. A child came to his parents... at a most inconvenient time.

And the angels started singing.

The God of the entire universe was born as a human, in a dirty stable, to young and poor parents. As far as the angels were concerned, this was cause for great joy!

To experience the true meaning of Christmas, we need to separate ourselves from the trimmings and trappings... and sometimes even from the beauty of a candlelit Christmas Eve worship service.

To appreciate the miracle of Christmas, we must enter the dark corner of a stable, a home for animals, with no artificial light or indoor plumbing.

Mary gave birth to Jesus, who emerged from the darkness of her womb, where God first became incarnate, into the only-slightly-less-dark stable where she and Joseph had been forced to stay during their unplanned trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

The story of Christmas is earthy, messy, dark, and very, very human.

Christmas teaches us that God shows up in the real moments of life – in the everyday stuff. Those Christmas trees and twinkling lights, visits to Santa at the mall, and even thoughtful gifts for loved ones – they are all just sideshows.

The main event happens when Jesus is born to impoverished parents staying under a borrowed roof, with no crib in which to lay their newborn baby's head. Mary had a baby – yes, Lord! – and that baby was placed in a feeding trough for animals, because there was no room for them at the inn.

An extraordinary young woman in God's eyes, Mary had basically no rights or standing in her society. She was a nobody, someone we'd pass on the street without a second glance.

And yet *she* was the one God choose to raise our savior.

Jesus' first moments would have been dark and smelly, and highly un-sanitary.

A labor and delivery nurse today would be appalled!

God chose to enter the world in the dark and dirt and mess of it all. There was no thematic nursery, no grandparents in the waiting room, no properly-installed car seat (camel seat? donkey seat?) in which to take the baby home.

God entered the world in a completely unremarkable way.

Oh, but don't worry! His arrival may have been somewhat unglamorous, but at least the baby Jesus had some "loving admirers" drop in for a visit during the first few hours of his life.

They were the shepherds. These guys slept in the fields, close to their sheep... and they probably looked and smelled like it. They worked 24-7, and stayed away from other people much of the time.

The shepherds were outcasts by the standards of civil society.

They were probably one of the few groups of people who the angels could visit in the middle of the night without waking them up.

These people on the margins of society were the first ones to hear the tidings of great joy – God's chosen one has entered the world, and everything is going to be different.

Would people in power have rejoiced over a poor child being born in a dirty stable to unmarried parents?

I think not.

The people who care about reputations and regulations would find many things to criticize about the birth of our savior.

So the angels sang their song of joy to the simplest people in society.

The shepherds were able to hear and appreciate the good news.

And it's the ordinary people in today's society who continue to bear witness to God's love incarnate in our midst.

Imagine the housekeepers – Muslim, Christian, atheist and agnostic – who have to work tonight in hotels around the country... the angels come to them.

Imagine the gas station employee, strapped for cash, who is thrilled to be working tonight for overtime pay... the angels come to him.

Imagine a security guard, who may have been a faithful churchgoer as a child, but found no compelling reason to stay. If you asked her, she might call herself a Christian... but she doesn't mind working on Christmas Eve and missing the annual family church outing. The angels come to her.

Think of Ada, our wonderful nursery attendant, who is currently available to watch after little ones so that their parents can worship in peace – she is the one to whom the angels will come – not us.

Those people who don't garner a second thought from others most of the time – those are the first people to hear about the birth of our savior.

Those most ordinary and earthy of humans, the ones who aren't afraid of the dirt and the muck and the dark – they are the ones who first are told,
Rejoice! Emmanuel // has come to you, O Israel!

Shepherds lived outdoors. They never went to worship. They were ritually unclean by virtue of their profession. Shepherds were people who walked in darkness.

Until they saw a great light, on the night Christ was born.

Jesus and the angels showed up in exactly the opposite of a place of power.

Jesus and the angels turned the world's expectations upside down.

Privileged society was left out of this celebration.

The marginalized were suddenly thrust into the center of the greatest event in world history.

That meant the people in power were left to learn from those whom they had been dismissing and discounting for their entire lives.

Somehow, all those privileged people must have figured out how to humble themselves enough to accept the good news from an unexpected place.

Because here we are. The Christian message and the story of Christmas endures today, both in places of power and in the margins of society. The news eventually spread from those shepherds in the fields to the people in cities and farms and palaces all around the world.

So *now* – the Christmas message comes to all of us without regard for our age or class, our race or gender, or any other marker that distinguishes us from other people. The good news of great joy is for *all* people!

The news came to everyone who was shopping at that Target a few years ago. That young angel sang tidings of great joy to Christians and Buddhists and atheists and Jews, and anyone else who was there.

That's the essence of the message God brings us on Christmas.

Sure, chestnuts roasting on open fires are nice... a white Christmas can be beautiful... and there's nothing wrong with wanting two front teeth or a hippopotamus for Christmas... but none of those things are the good news that the angels proclaim to the shepherds.

The birth of Jesus and the message of the angels remind us to look for God in ordinary places and among ordinary people.

It can be easy to recognize God's presence in a majestic choral performance of Handel's *Messiah*... but God was just as present at our Sunday School Christmas program last week... and God also showed up at each rehearsal for that program, even when the kids might have gotten a little out of hand.

Jesus comes into the world in a little village, not some grand cultural center. He begins life in a stable, not a 5-star hotel.

God shows up in the romantic date nights and elaborate vacations, and in evenings spent on the couch in your pajamas. Jesus is there in the great works of art, in the doodles that a bored student makes in their notebooks, and in the scribbled drawings of hands that are still learning to hold a crayon.

God is just as present in the dark as in the light – just as real in the grit and the grime as in the well-polished nativity scene.

This is the good news of Christmas for us:

Jesus comes without ribbons. He comes without tags.

He comes without packages, boxes, or bags!

God doesn't even expect us to be ready for the birth of Jesus.

The angels weren't sent to the folks who were the most prepared, or most worthy, or who had been waiting the longest.

The shepherds were simply the ones who were there, who were willing to listen to the good news that they brought.

On Christmas, God's love shows up in a little boy, born to a poor teenage mother, who is stuck far from home.

We honor that baby when we see God in those around us who may also be poor or outcast, or far from home, but who God loves enough to grace with the presence of angels.

This Christmas, let us all look for God in the face of our neighbor.

And let us listen for the voice of God to speak to us from unexpected places.

Amen.