

1 How many times do you think you've heard or read the Christmas story from the Bible? I'm fifty-eight years old, so I know that it's been many more than fifty-eight times. As a pastor, I imagine I've read it at least 580 times. I'm guessing that even you have heard it enough times that it's become easy to miss some of the familiar details and to lose just a little of the wonder the story had for you the first few times you heard it. It's kind of like the taste of ice cream. Think back to the last time you had some really excellent ice cream. Can you remember taking the very first bite, what it tasted like, and how satisfying it was? Do you remember how the first bite lead you take another, and another, until eventually you realized that you'd eaten it all? A funny thing happens after those first few bites. Not only do our tongues begin to freeze, but our taste buds begin to get saturated, so that after a while, we're more or less eating automatically, still enjoying the ice cream, but usually not with anything near to the same thrill of enjoyment that came with that first bite.

Hearing the Christmas story can become like eating ice cream for us. We can enjoy hearing it for the hundredth time, enjoy the feelings that come with Christmas and with singing the carols, but it doesn't take long for our hearts and minds to wander and for us to stop paying careful attention. And that's a shame, because there are some amazing flavors to the Christmas story that we've forgotten. I invite you to clear your palate tonight and taste the Christmas Story again in the fullness of its extraordinary flavors.

2 What really grabbed my attention this year as I read the old, old story was something the angel Gabriel said to the shepherds, and something Mary did when she heard the story from the shepherds. And this is the phrase that intrigued me: "All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them."¹ Amazed! Not curious. Not interested. Amazed. In this time of the internet, digital cameras, and instantaneous, world-wide communication, when was the last time that you were actually amazed by something? Not just interested or impressed, but amazed? I was last amazed when I watched the BBC series "Blue Planet," when I saw sea creatures for the first time that I never could have even imagined existed. But amazed by the Christmas story? Unless you heard it tonight for the

¹ Luke 2:18, New Revised Standard Version

first time, odds are that it didn't amaze you. What was it that the shepherds said that was so spectacular that it amazed the people gathered around the baby in the manger?

Try putting yourself in their shoes. If someone told you they had been delivered a singing telegram from God, delivered by a sky full of shining, otherworldly creatures, you'd have to either be amazed or hurrying to put as much distance between yourself and the crazy person you were talking to. We're so used to reading about angels in the Christmas story that we forget how extraordinary their appearance was. That the creator of the universe would choose to speak to common shepherds would have been even more astonishing.

The message as well was designed to grab our attention. Hear it again as if you were one of those shepherds working the night shift with their flock: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Now remember, the people listening to the shepherds' story were gathered around a newborn baby in a dirty stable, wrapped in cloth strips and lying in a manger, which is a feeding trough for livestock. Savior? Messiah? Lord? Those titles belonged to nobility, not to common people like Mary and Joseph, and certainly not to children born in a barn. That's why all who heard the story of the shepherds were amazed! Not curious. Not interested. Amazed. What would it take for you to be amazed by the birth of Jesus again, to receive the Good News of Christmas as if it were really Good News? Do you need to see the angels for yourself, or can you open your heart enough tonight to let God stir the embers of your faith and rekindle your imagination?

3 And then there was Mary. Who can possibly understand the full extent of her experience on that holy night? Luke gives us a small glimpse into Mary's heart when he records her response to the shepherds' story: "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."²

Have you ever wondered why it is that Mary "treasured" those words? I could offer you a score of informed theological guesses, but I think the answer might be a little simpler than that. Perhaps just as God chose to reveal himself in a stable rather than a palace, God also chose to reveal himself in something so common and yet so powerful as a mother's

² Luke 2:19, New Revised Standard Version

love. Jesus was Mary's first-born child. Even under more ordinary circumstances, that had to have changed her heart in a dramatic way. As Mary lie in the straw with her son, these unexpected visitors from the fields around Bethlehem were talking about him, her son! It may be as simple as that. She treasured the words that affirmed the very things she remembered the angel telling her: Her son would be special. Her son was blessed and would grow to be a blessing to all people. Her son. As surely as a mother today treasures praises of her child, Mary treasured these words shared by the shepherds.

4 But Mary's thoughts and the story of the shepherds were never meant to remain lodged in the ancient past, and so we also hear these words that are an invitation to each one of us tonight: Mary "pondered" those words "in her heart." When you hear the words of the Christmas story, do you ponder them in your heart? Sometimes those words barely register in our minds before we've moved on, mentally taking an inventory of last-minute gift wrapping or grocery shopping.

It's still Christmas Eve, so it's not too late to let the astonishing news of the angels sink into your heart and stir your soul. Christmas is a magical time, not because of all the lights and the cookies, but because the unimaginable has occurred. The Holy one took on flesh, born as a helpless child to an ordinary young woman, and yet destined to bring freedom and joy into all our lives. Ponder what that might mean for you. Savor it, like you would savor that first bite of ice cream. The Christmas story is the sweetest of stories, good news of great joy for all, and its well-worth lingering over.

5 Christmas is upon us, a time of amazement, a time when heaven and earth come together in the most unexpected of places, a manger. While God was high *above* us, Jesus was born so that God is now *with* us, Emanuel. Christmas is a time to ponder God's relentless and miraculous love, to embrace the real and powerful presence of God in our lives, and to announce the Good News of the birth of Jesus by showing the same relentless love to others. This year, don't be satisfied with just going through the motions. Enjoy singing the Christmas carols, but allow the joy of Christmas into your heart as you sing. Enjoy sharing gifts, but don't forget to share the Good News of the most important Christmas gift of all, Jesus. The original Christmas was a time marked with amazement and joy. May this Christmas be so for you as well!



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