

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

There are two stories to tell tonight, two stories as different as day and night, light and darkness, heaven and earth.

The first is a story that all could see. A poor man and his pregnant fiancée were forced to travel eighty five miles from home. The emperor Augustus wanted people counted. Joseph was required to return to the city of his ancestors, Bethlehem. Poor Mary the neighbors must have sighed as they set out from Nazareth to journey to Bethlehem. Poor Mary.

Whether they rode or walked, we do not know. Nor how long it took them, nor how long they stayed. But while they were there we are told, the time came for her to deliver her child.

Bethlehem was a busy town that night. There was no place for Joseph and Mary in the inn that night. And no one offered them a room, a corner, a place. Clearly Joseph did not know the right people. He had no connections. Clearly Mary was not so attractive that people wanted to help. If tonight a woman were to begin labor pains on the streets of Cleveland, I suspect a place would be found, but for Mary there was no place. Poor Mary.

She gave birth to her firstborn son and laid him in a manger.

His first bed had been licked clean by cattle tongues. Hardly where any of us would want to place our child minutes after it opened its eyes to life in this world.

Mary did what she could, she took bands of cloth, and bound her child tightly with those bands. She did what every mother of her time would do, and like so many mothers she wanted to do more, but she was poor. Poor Mary.

While all this was happening, all around them in Bethlehem that night there must have been drinking and dancing, a grand celebration as people from all over were gathered by the census. No one knew nor cared that a child had been born outside where cattle fed.

Now that's the end of the first story. The second story begins nearby.

Shepherds were in a field. This was a night like any other night until suddenly an angel of the Lord stood before them. The brightness and the glory of the Lord lit up the night. They were terrified. But the angel said to them, "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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." Suddenly angels filled the sky, heaven and earth were one, shepherds heard a choir of angels singing, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will among people.

The shepherds went and saw holy Mary, honored Mary, privileged Mary because she had given birth to the Messiah. Christ the Lord. The cattle stall became the place of a true joy and celebration, for God was here, entering human life to save us all from sin and death. No mansion nor palace on earth was as glorious as this place, for the one named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace lay on a bed of hay.

Two stories, yet one story seen in two ways. Through human eyes this is a story of human poverty, suffering, a reason for sadness. But from a divine point of view, the cause of greatest rejoicing. Those who had not heard the angels word saw only poor Mary. Poor Jesus. But those who heard worshiped their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Now all of us know both of those stories so very well. But every day our lives also are two stories and we may not even know it.

First there is the story that all can see. The cars we drive, the home we live in, the clothes we wear, the work we do, the grades we get in school, whether we are honored or despised. We ride that story every day, like riding a car on a hilly road. A promotion at work and we rise to the top, an honor at school, and people pay more attention to us. An accident and we are beaten down. The death of a loved one and we sink to the bottom.

But all the while there is a second story, your story that begins back there on Bethlehem. For Mary's child lived and died for you that you might be God's child. Mary's Son was raised from the dead for you so that you would always know that one day you will be honored with that very same eternal life. When you were baptized Mary's Son breathed his own Spirit into you that you might be filled with God.

Everything in your first story you will lose. All people and possessions, even earthly life itself. But in your second story there is no losing. God will keep you and hold you as his child for all eternity.

I hope for each of us that as we go with the shepherd to Bethlehem this night, That we will see Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus from a heavenly point of view. And worship and praise the Holy Son of God.

I hope for each of us that as you live out your life you will daily see yourself from a heavenly point of view also. You are a precious child of God through Jesus, this night and forever.