

“And the child shall be named Wonderful Counselor,  
Mighty God, Everlasting Father,  
Prince of Peace.” AMEN!

When I was on internship  
at a congregation in Camp Hill, PA, it was  
the vicar’s responsibility to lead  
the family service on Christmas Eve.

“Be ready,” they said. “You’ll get 80-90 children and  
it is controlled chaos, at best!”

The good news was that the children’s message  
part of the service was  
the sermon portion.

“Be as creative as possible to hold their attention.”  
they said.

“Get in and then get out and  
whatever you do  
avoid long speeches otherwise  
they’ll get restless!”

I was terrified to say the least. :-)

So, I told the story of “The Three Trees,”  
a traditional folktale that brings to life how three

trees played unexpected, but  
very important parts in the way  
God broke into the world  
through Jesus.

But being that this was my 1st chance  
to lead Christmas Eve,  
I simply did not want to read  
the story from the book.

I took the time to commit it to memory and  
then put together some props and  
even recruited Davis and Wesley to play  
the part of the woodsmen.

Imagine my good fortune when we went to a fall play  
at one of their schools and found  
that the art department had made  
these large cardboard trees for props.

When the play was over, they let me have them  
so I had these really cool trees as  
backdrop in front of the altar for the service.

Everything was coming together well!

I got one more volunteer from the church  
to be the third woodsman  
and I made each one a cardboard ax.

The three trees were set and balanced  
just so that when the ax tapped a piece of  
wood that propped the tree up  
it would harmlessly fall.

What could go wrong, right? :-)

The kids came forward for the children's  
time sermon on the big night and  
I realized I might have a problem.

We filled all the steps up to the chancel, but there  
was no stopping now to make paths  
for the woodsman.

I had to keep the story going,  
lest things deteriorate!

When it came time for the woodsmen to enter,  
the children were engaged and enraptured at  
their costumes and axes.

They each carefully tiptoed around the little ones and  
got in place at their tree.

Woodsman #1 swung his ax and down the tree fell,  
the same result with woodsman #2.

Success!

When it came time for the third tree to fall,  
something happened.

It didn't!

So the woodsman didn't know what to do.

He looked at me...

I was stuck in the middle of all the children and  
couldn't go up to help.

There was that pregnant pause when  
everyone wondered  
what would happen next!

It seemed like everything was going to fall apart,  
as 10 seconds felt like 10 minutes.

How could the story go on if the third tree did not fall?

In the panic, then out of the corner of my eye,  
I saw the church's director of music,  
down on his hands and knees  
to avoid being seen by the audience.

Of course, everyone saw him!

We watched him crawl and maneuver his way  
to the “not yet” felled tree.

Now, Tim was the kind of music director  
that everyone loved.

Those in adult choir, kinda feared him,  
but he brought the kind of fear to them  
that led to beautiful music!

To me, he was NOT the kind of person who got  
down on his hands and knees in order  
to crawl out and  
rescue a deer-in-the-headlights vicar!

Yet, there he was coming to the rescue.

In an act of self-sacrifice he made sure  
the third tree fell and  
it landed right on top of him!

The relief that came washed over  
the entire church in joyful laughter.

The story continued that late afternoon because  
Tim was willing to come to the rescue.

The unexpected savior, Tim, taught

me an important lesson. (Pause)

God meets us in the most obscure places.

As I look out to all of you here and  
to you at home,  
this is my prayer.

That you recognize God meeting you  
in the obscure places of your life.

No matter where you are...  
God is there and no matter  
where you are going...

God is already there often in  
the most obscure places. (Pause)

This is, after all, the overall theme  
for us this Christmas Eve.

No matter who you are no matter  
what you do or have done,  
God is meeting you.

It is just that sometimes we forget to  
know where to look, or  
how to look for God.

Christmas reorients us and our gospel  
from Luke reminds us because sometimes  
we look for God in the  
places of political power.

Luke made note that the center of  
earthly power was in Rome.

“A decree went out” and then we learn  
about the center of power in a region,  
Syria and Judea.

From this “top down” decree it was the families  
that experienced displacement.

Their obscure balances and fragile livelihoods  
were unnecessarily burdened.

Even those in poverty and bursting with pregnancy  
had to negotiate a travel to follow  
the emperor’s decree.

No surprise that God was not met in  
the halls of political power.

But then we hear the story of the shepherds  
and we are reminded that it was in  
the outlying fields where the shepherds  
were watching their flocks at night.

Apart from kings and queens and governors.

Apart even from the disenfranchised  
but holy family.

We read how in a most obscure place  
a brilliant light came... and God met them.

One angel with a clear message and  
then the Bible tells us that  
“suddenly there was with that angel  
a multitude of the heavenly host.”

Suddenly an army of angels bursts  
into the quiet scene.

In an obscure place...  
to an obscure group of people...  
God met people in a heavenly glow to  
bring us to rejoice!

It should not be a surprise to learn that  
while shepherds were indeed a lowly position  
on the socio-economic scale their

diligent work modeled  
the way of God with God’s people.



God is the great Shepherd  
electrifying/inspiring people in ways  
we scarcely can imagine.

Enormous joy even in trying times.

So, it must be said clearly this night,  
“Heaven and earth meet in obscure places,  
not in the halls of power.”

Angels announce to shepherds and  
the shepherds announce to the world.

This birth will be the joy of all people!

God in a vulnerable baby will have a  
salvation effect on everyone.

And this is reason enough to celebrate.(Pause)

Yet, we cannot sweep under the rug  
this important detail.

Mary, “pondered.”

The shepherds put things together well enough  
to become jubilant.

They went to see the baby for themselves and

told Mary and Joseph what the angels had said.

Mary was given more proof to recognize  
that her child is the Lord and Messiah.

We are told that she treasured this affirmation,  
but it also made her wonder what it was all  
going to mean for her...

what was it all going to mean  
for her brand new child and family...

what was it all going to mean for the world?

Here he is the Lord, the Messiah...  
in a feeding trough for animals...

Mary pondered all these things as she tried  
to make meaning of everything being  
thrown at her. (Pause)

Beloved, are you trying to make meaning  
out of everything that is happening?

I know that I am trying to find meaning  
amidst the political realities of today,  
the tragedy of gun violence, grief in  
family fights and  
fear in pandemic separations...

What do they all mean?

Mary might not have had all of her  
pondering questions solved that night,  
and so neither do we need to have all  
of our questions solved. (Pause)

But, wrapped in the mystery of this night we simply,  
lovingly, need to know that God intrudes  
into our world and meets us.

In the darkness of the field,  
in the cry of an infant, and in the rough  
shape of the manger.

A Rescuer came... a Savior is coming.

Love has come, share in the wonder,  
for it is what we are seeking...  
the true gift of Christmas,  
pointing our way to God.

AMEN!