



# Christmas 2022

## Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



25 December 2022

### READINGS

Isaiah 52: 7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1: 1-4, (5-12); Luke 2: 1-20

### *A Christmas story*

This time of year carries with it many-layered meanings and practices. Family traditions; retail therapy for some and economic success for retailers as every mall and shopping centre will be decked with tinsel, elaborately decorated Christmas trees and remastered carols. And it is our tendency to want to want to evaluate this year as we end it – rightly so, before embarking on another. All these things, along with a group of stories like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Frosty the Snowman and other such stories find their way into our consciousness, our decorations, our gift-buying habits, our parties, and into our expectations.

My special Christmas story is one that was told by my late grandmother in my rural home in Limpopo every Christmas Eve as we sat around the fire in great anticipation for the next day. Simply, my grandmother told us each year that if you got up early before sunrise, on Christmas day, and watch the sun as it peeks through the horizon, you'd actually notice the red big ball bobbing as it danced for Christ on the day of his birth! This became the greatest mystery for us children as we would hardly sleep on Christmas Eve for fear of missing the sunrise of Christmas Day. Our maturing minds marvelled at the consciousness of nature – even the sun dances for the Christ-child. What a great day it was. Now that I'm older, I still marvel at the wisdom of my devout granny who found a way for us to enter into the heart of the nativity mystery.

Our culture, though, treats Christmas with hugely sentimental attention. We watch specials on TV, we go and fish out our CD's that have been packed away to listen to our favourite carols or stream from our Apple music and spotify. There is something inherently sentimental about this season. And at Christmas we long for our families to catch a glimpse and join in the merriment. All very good because traditions instruct and shape our common psyche, they delight us and remind us of our common values.

In the tradition of the Church there are three Christmas liturgies. These three liturgies celebrate and focus on what the Church understands to be and describes as the three births of Jesus. The first liturgy, the Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, celebrates and focuses on the human birth of God from the Virgin Mary. It is the physical birth of Jesus. The second liturgy is traditionally celebrated very early on Christmas Day. It's focus is the birth of Jesus in our own lives. The final Christmas liturgy is held later in the day on Christmas Day and focuses on the eternal giving of God's self in and to humanity. The Word is always being made flesh and dwelling among us.

If last night, Christmas Eve, celebrated the physical birth of Jesus into the world, today is about his spiritual birth in our souls. Christmas Day asks us to move from the fact of Jesus' birth to the meaning of his birth. What does his birth mean for your life and my life? What do our lives look like now in light of this birth? How does this birth change the way we perceive our reality? Important as these questions are, no one person can provide answers for everyone. We must each do that for ourselves. Jesus' birth in each of our lives is as unique and particular as is each of our lives.

Today's gospel doesn't tell us what that meaning is or will be for us. It does, however, gives us a couple of clues about how to discover and make meaning of Jesus' birth in our lives. The shepherds and Mary are our guides. First, the shepherds. The angel's announcement of Jesus' birth interrupted their lives. It called them away from their field and watching their flock. They went to Bethlehem to find "the child lying in a manger." The "good news of great joy" is announced in the ordinary everyday circumstances of our lives. It's an audacious thing, if you come to think of it: that the birth of a baby to an unmarried teenager in an insignificant town could possibly matter. And Shepherds were not held in high regard. In many ways, they have been thought of as bumbling, uneducated, country bumpkins. And yet there, in a nutshell, is the promise of the Gospel: that God regularly shows up where we least expect God to be and always for us.

It happens in our fields while we are watching our flocks. What are your particular fields and flocks? Family and friends, the ups and downs of life, frustrations and celebrations, joys and sorrows, illness and health,... That's where we will make and experience the meaning of Jesus' birth in our lives. Christmas, however, is not an escape from our fields and flock. What did the shepherds do after they saw "the child lying in the manger?" They returned. The birth that interrupted and called the shepherds away from their fields and flock is also the birth that returned them to their field and flock. They returned to the same field and the same flock. Their field and flock were not different but they were. They carried the birth of Jesus within them back to their own community.

What about the Blessed Virgin Mary? She has much to teach us here. Notice how she says nothing in today's gospel. Instead, Luke tells us she "treasured" and "pondered." Perhaps that's how we begin to make meaning of Jesus' birth. Making meaning is not so much about explaining, understanding, or analyzing. It's about wondering, musing, discovering. It's not about finding the answer. There is no one answer or meaning of Jesus' birth. There are as many meanings as there are fields and flocks, the circumstances of our lives. Luke reminds us that the Gospel has always been set amid world events as a promise that God works among the seemingly small and insignificant to change the world. When you get right down to it, the Gospel message of hope, grace, and peace seems rather improbable, even unlikely. But for just that reason this is the story we should keep coming back to, hoping against hope – and actually believing – that it is the one true story we will encounter this week, year, and in our lifetime. That God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son, that whosoever believe in him, shall have eternal life.

So let's let this story seep into the dark areas of our souls, those places we wonder if it can possibly be true, those spaces where the world's darkness seems so much more prominent than the light. Because that's what this story was made for – to shine light in dark places, to bring hope to the discouraged, insight to the lost, and the promise of peace to all who long for it. Each year on this day, we come to celebrate, beyond the distractions of the season, that God came into this world, for our healing, our eternal life, our forgiveness. 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 Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:10b-11)

To all who receive him, [Jesus] gave [us the] power to become children of God. May you all have a wonderful Christmas with family and friends!! Amen