

## **Christmas Eve 2021**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 24, 2021

Luke 2:1-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

I occasionally say that Isaiah is my favorite book of the Bible. Naming a favorite book of the Bible is like naming a favorite Christmas carol. It's hard to choose one when there are so many good ones. But Isaiah is sort of the back door entry into Christmas, and into Holy Week, and Christmas and Holy Week are the two peak occasions of Christianity. And Isaiah is written mostly for a broken and shattered people. A disobedient people, to be sure. And sinful. But it is written for sinners who are afraid and desperate and frequently broken.

And at the outset of this magnificent Old Testament book— and it is the sixth longest book in the Bible, sprawling across many decades and the rule of many kings— at the outset of this grand volume we are introduced to two animals. The ox and the donkey. Or in slightly older language, the ox and the ass. The ox and the donkey know who their master is. They know. “Master” in the sense of the one who feeds them and who owns them. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib— Crib, in the sense of food trough. My cousins had a dairy farm in upstate New York, and I marveled at how the cows knew which stall was their own. Dozens of cows, coming in from pasture, each going to its respective stall. They know, they know. They know where they belong. And they know to whom they belong. The same is true of dogs and of sheep. And many other domesticated animals.

But Isaiah does not say dogs or sheep, even though sheep are the ubiquitous animals of our Bible. Isaiah says the ox and the donkey. And because Isaiah said ox and donkey, those two animals have ended up in the Christmas story. Even though the New Testament never mentions anything of the kind. In our art, in our Christmas carols, in our nativity settings, the ox and the donkey take their place along with the sheep and whatever other creatures we place there. If you want camels in your Christmas art, then you have Isaiah alone to thank for that as well. He mentions the camels; the New Testament itself doesn't say how those wise men might have traveled. The camels, the ox, the donkey. They come from Isaiah. Not from the gospel writers. Isaiah: our back door entry into Christmas, as well as Holy Week.

The magnificent book of the prophet Isaiah begins with the ox, who knows where he belongs, and to whom he belongs. And the donkey, who knows where he belongs, and to whom he belongs. But God says, my people do not know. They do not understand. The ox and the donkey are held up to us by Isaiah as a contrast to humanity. They get it. But we do not. The ox and the donkey are the antithesis of us.

When an artist puts the ox and the donkey into their depiction of the birth of Jesus, the artist is making a small sermon. The ox and donkey know where they belong and to whom they belong. And now, because of this baby, human beings can at last begin to know and to understand where *we* belong and to whom *we* belong. So when we come to the manger Isaiah's ox and donkey are already there. Because they have always known their master. It is we who have wandered and turned away. But now, in the birth of this baby in Bethlehem, we come home. This baby will bring us back to our rightful place, to our rightful home.

The word "home" carries great feeling, great emotional force. Especially at this time of year. We try to capture that sense of home. We try to create that sense of home. But just as a statue of Jesus is not the living God, just as a representation of the Holy Spirit is not the same thing as the actual spirit of God, some of our holiday endeavors and our holiday traditions mimic home, imitate home, are nostalgic for home. But they are not our true home. I think that the entire annual profitability of the Hallmark Channel on cable, and its sister network the Hallmark Movie Channel, is built on one idea. That everything comes home and becomes beautiful and right on Christmas Eve. That one plot has spawned dozens or hundreds of movies. Everything is messed up, and she is engaged to the wrong guy, and grandma is in the hospital, but on Christmas Eve everyone is happy and together, and gathered around the fireplace. And the right man is engaged to the right woman. It's schlocky. But I am as susceptible to it as anyone else. My personal vice is "Love Actually." No human being has ever cried more tears about the arrivals lounge at Heathrow Airport than I have. If you don't know the movie, that's where the homecomings and the reunions take place.

But these are our statues of Jesus. They are nostalgic recreations of the real meaning of Christmas. And when they succeed, they are wonderful. But when they fail—when grandma doesn't get out of the hospital, when the marriage is a mistake, when UPS delivers the package late, when the holiday roast is burned on the outside and raw on the inside—when they fail, we can feel cheated. Or we can feel depressed. I'll be singing along with "Oh, There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays," and then I'll realize I'm singing along with Karen Carpenter, and then I'll be angry with God. Why did she have to die so young?

But that's not our true home. Mary and Joseph are dislocated. Their home is Nazareth. But they are in Bethlehem. Because of a government mandate. And they are in a barnyard giving birth. It's not home for the holidays. It's not a Hallmark Channel Movie. But we are here because they were *there*. Or more precisely, this baby brings us all home. Home to the presence of God.

The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib. We are the ones who have forgotten where we belong, and to whom we belong. But this baby has the power to bring us back to where we belong. And that is why we celebrate Christmas. And we take our place alongside the ox and the donkey. Amen.