

We love the Christmas Story and we use our imagination so that we can be part of it, we can tell the story or act out the story, or sing about the story.

There's lots of the Christmas story that we are very familiar with but isn't actually in the bible – like the donkey.

I'm sure Joseph will have taken Mary to Bethlehem on a donkey, but it doesn't say he does, we imagine that's what it was like.

Ignatius of Loyola who (with two others) founded the Jesuits created the Spiritual Exercises and encouraged people to read the bible with imagination – imagine yourself there.

And so I did – and I've written a short story.

Why?

I think I've heard and seen the Nativity just about every which way. I've acted in it as a child, conducted nativity services, watched anxiously as my son played with a stuffed chicken instead of adoring the child in the manger, and heard the readings very many times.

It can get so familiar that I've actually stopped taking notice. Entering the story in an imaginative way allowed me to connect again with the wonder of the Word made flesh, God being with us, Immanuel. I hope the same is true for you.

I was the shepherd that got left behind.

I was on the hillside that night. I saw the angel appear and was as frightened as anyone. He told us not to be afraid, there was good news, great news...our Saviour had been born. We were chosen to hear the news first.

He said to go down in to Bethlehem to find the child, in a manger of all things. A feeding trough!

Then the choir of Angels sang. Oh my what a wonderful sound and glorious sight.

Then they were gone. What to do? Well – there was no question. Let's go down to Bethlehem and find the baby. That's when it happened.

Who's going to guard the sheep? Who's going to keep the fire going? Who's going to look after our few possessions. They chose me. I'm the youngest. I was left behind.

I never heard the end of it. Virtually every night after that they wanted to tell the story over and over. The Angel. The choir. The journey down into Bethlehem. Finding the family in a stable. Seeing the baby in the manger. I got sick of it. I would walk away and come back when they'd finished. They were so excited, so full of it, so amazed at what God was doing. I felt angry. I was left out, I was left behind.

Then sometime later we were there again, a dark dark night, sheep safely in the cave, we were sitting in the entrance, a fire was burning, then out of the gloom a procession, a caravan of people on camels and walking and seeking.

A voice from the dark spoke out in a funny foreign accent – “can someone lead us down into Bethlehem” “I will” – I said it before I'd really thought about it. It was my turn for something new, something to talk about.

I jumped up and said confidently “this way” and led them down into Bethlehem. “Where do you want to go?” I asked “to the Inn? To the Roman prefect?” To visit a house?”

They didn't answer right away and then someone asked "has a child been born recently?"

"Why yes" I answered "and it's very strange...because they are visiting and had no-where to stay. They are actually using a stable."

"Take us there," said the voice.

I had heard about the stable so many times from the other shepherds, I felt as if I'd been there myself. So, I took them straight there. Such strange people – so foreign looking in robes and turbans. They spoke a language I didn't know.

They went into the stable carrying packages. No-one said I should stay outside, so I slipped in at the back.

It was very quiet even with so many people. I saw the family my shepherd friends had talked about and they looked a little startled.

In the dim light I could see the foreign travellers, they were men of high rank and status. Such fine robes. Then, they began to kneel, there in the mucky stable. They knelt down. They...bowed down.

The baby's mother looked over them and saw me. I was standing just inside the door. She put out her hand to invite me and I went forward. She took my hand and took me to the little manger filled with sweet hay and the baby wrapped up in cloths.

I found that I too was kneeling looking in wonder at the baby. I felt so peaceful. He managed to get an arm free from the wrapping cloths and starting waving his hand about. I reached out and he grabbed my finger and held on tight. I let him hold my finger until he tried to put it in his mouth and then his mother said he was hungry and so we said thank you and went outside.

I felt elated. I felt like I'd never felt before. The Angel said this was the Saviour of the World. And he held my finger.

Now I would have a story to tell. The others found the baby. But there in the stable...the baby found me.

I wonder if you've felt left out or left behind.

That other people get their prayers answered and seem confident in their faith, but somehow it has eluded you.

But you are here. You've come to worship and hear the wonderful story again.

This Christmas may it be your story. Christ being born for you.

He knows who you are, where you are and all that you are. And is FOR you.

May his peace and grace fill your life this Christmas.

Amen.

**Rev. Jon Hutchinson**

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