

Scenes from Nativity

(SLIDE 2) Think for a moment about all the nativities you have seen.

(SLIDE 3) Maybe you have seen some grand and priceless sets made from porcelain or pewter;

(SLIDE 4) or maybe you have seen sets priceless in the devotion the artists expressed by making the scene from the materials the artists had at hand—stone, wood, shells, corn husks, coconuts, scrimshaw.

(SLIDE 5) No doubt you have seen some that are hyper realistic, others whimsical.

(SLIDE 6) Some are formal and artistic, others very humble. And all of these—every figure and element—is dedicated to helping us see the story and live the story.

(SLIDE 7) And so every year I like to try to find myself in the scene and today I will invite you to do the same. If you had to pick one role, one nativity figure that represents your faith in the Christ child, your sense of calling for the year to come, which role would be right for you?

(SLIDE 8) I think this is an important question because the great story God is telling is not about a thing that is fixed and forever finished. No, it's an ongoing story, and you have a role to play. As our faith journey continues, deepens, changes, who we find ourselves most drawn to might change. So the question for today is: who are you this year?

(SLIDE 9) Maybe you're an angel, the messengers who told first Mary and then Joseph and then the shepherds the amazing news.

(SLIDE 10) Now some of you might say, hey, I'm no angel—but the angels are the eternal messengers, the ones who deliver good news about God's plans.

(SLIDE 11) You might be one of this choir if you are like my friend Douglas, who is a mail carrier on a rural route. He told me a few years ago about a day so cold the mailboxes were frozen shut.

But Douglas knew some of his deliveries were essential, like medicine, and some were important, like a birthday card Granma had tucked some money inside. If you are someone counted on to bring help and good cheer to the people around you, reminders that they are not alone, you might be like an angel.

(SLIDE 12) Our nativity also needs a Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary is young and innocent, but she is also brave and idealistic. In reality, she was probably a teenager, a scared pregnant teenager who grew along with her son in wisdom and truth.

(SLIDE 13) She was a woman strong enough to stand at the crucifixion while others fled, and who was faithful enough to be among the women at the tomb who heard the news of the resurrection.

(SLIDE 14) You might be a Mary if you have a strength other people don't see behind your mild exterior.

(SLIDE 15) And then there is Joseph. Joseph is in touch with this very spiritual thing, and yet he is also a very practical man, a carpenter, the one who got Mary on that donkey to go pay his tax. We might think of him as solid and silent,

(SLIDE 16) But he also had this mystical side—he trusted his dreams—and some of his dreams saved lives.

(SLIDE 17) If you are a Joseph you work to balance these two sides, the practical and spiritual.

(SLIDE 18) What we need next, of course, is a baby. And in a great many nativities I am sad to report we have a rather blonde Jesus, which is certainly not what the historical Jesus looked like.

(SLIDE 19) But all of us, all over the world, have a desire to see Jesus looking like us, like part of our family. There are nativities with a baby who is dark skinned, Asian, wrapped up in native American blankets, and that is as it should be.

(SLIDE 20) He came to be one of us.

(SLIDE 21) And so because we are in a stable, we need animals. At the very least, a donkey shaggy and brown, the one who carried Mary to Bethlehem.

(SLIDE 22) Goats and cows were possibly housed in a stable near an inn so the innkeeper could provide for the guests.

(SLIDE 23) And if there were donkeys and cows, you know there were dogs.

(SLIDE 24) And a place that might have mice almost certainly needs a cat.

(SLIDE 25) There were chickens and doves hanging around that night.

(SLIDE 26) In some of the great nativities I have seen from other countries, there were llamas and penguins, kangaroos and koalas, and one of my favorites,

(SLIDE 27) a South African scene with meerkats.

(SLIDE 28) In all of them there are sheep, who came with the shepherds, who the angels sent to see this amazing sight.

(SLIDE 29) It's not a glamorous job being a shepherd. It's a blue-collar kind of job, though there is also a tradition of the shepherd who becomes king, like David. There is some danger—wolves, predators. Sheep wander off.

(SLIDE 30) It can be a very lonely job. But you know, this is a great job for someone who is a bit of a dreamer, someone who loves looking up at the sky and seeing patterns in the heavens, messages in clouds. Shepherds maybe were the ones to get the message about Jesus because they were watching the sky that night.

(SLIDE 31) I left the wise men out of the scene so far because they did not arrive on Christmas, they came 12 days later, on Epiphany. Our magi are in the narthex, travelling toward Bethlehem.

(SLIDE 32) The wise men were from far away, they brought mysterious gifts—they represent a kind of otherness, the first sign that God intends through this baby born in this stable to reach out to people from every place and human condition to be God's own children. If you have ever felt a little different, a little on the outside of the usual roles, then maybe you are on that trip, following that star.

(SLIDE 33) Maybe you are like the star, a light that blazes with intensity and purpose.

(SLIDE 34) Maybe you were the stable. Does that seem too weird?

A stable is a place with room in it. Room for the animals, room for storage. Room for a family in desperate need to find shelter. Are you a person who gives shelter to others?

(SLIDE 35) Maybe you feel like you have too many braying animals and too much junk in plastic tubs in your stable right now. That's okay. The real question is, when asked by God to shove that stuff over and let something new and precious be born, will you respond? will you help?

(SLIDE 36) All these symbols are a testament to God's grace, to the grace we receive in creation itself. The grace we receive in our families and our community. The grace, most of all in our receiving as a gift the presence of God in our midst, Emmanuel, God with us and for us.

(SLIDE 37) So, one more time, look at the figures and decide on one who you feel the most drawn to. Is it Mary?

(SLIDE 38) Or Joseph?

(SLIDE 39) One of the animals? Which one?

(SLIDE 40) The baby?

(SLIDE 41) A shepherd?

(SLIDE 42) A visitor from a far land, or the star they followed?

(SLIDE 43) Receive that gift, and you will begin to see the story of it told all around you, and you can spend your days in wonder love and praise.

(SLIDE 44) Receive God's gift today, friends. And then let it tell you who you are called to be this year. Play your part in God's story, and the story will always be in you, with you, as a great and glorious gift. Be glad for the gift, and tell it with your life. Amen.