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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/24/2015, Christmas Eve
Luke 2:1-20
Visiting the Holy Manger

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Come with me, my friends: Let us visit the holy manger of the Christ Child. There was no room for him in the inn, so we will not stop there. The lights and warmth of that inn might beckon to us — all those candles alit and logs ablaze in the fireplace — but there is no need for us to seek the Christ Child there, for he is not there, he is in the stable.

Nor should we look for baby Jesus in the palace in nearby Jerusalem. Granted: it is natural that we should seek him there. Even the Wise Men from the East seem to have assumed that such a royal child would be born in that palace, and so they forsook their star for a while to go to the place. But this is not for us. Let us not waste time seeking admittance to some beautiful house, for he is not there. Let's head for the stable. He is there. Ox and donkey make room for him. Hens probably wander right beneath the holy manger. It's hard to control those birds. They seem to wander wherever they want. But Jesus does not mind. And he certainly does not mind that you and I should come to him there in the stable!

Let me share with you one of Martin Luther's great Christmas passages. I want to lift up this particular passage because my sermon this evening is a variation on it. Luther — who stands at the head of our Lutheran tradition — Luther loved Christmas. He wrote many, many beautiful Christmas sermons and hymns. Here is one of my favorite passages from one of his sermons:

Look upon the Baby Jesus. Divinity may terrify man. Inexpressible majesty will crush him. That is why Christ took on our humanity, save for sin, that he should not terrify us but rather that with love and favor he should console and confirm. Behold Christ lying in the lap of his young mother. What can be sweeter than the Babe... Look at the Child... that your conscience should not fear but take comfort in him. Doubt nothing... You cannot fear him, for nothing is more appealing to man than a babe. Are you affrightened? Then come to him, lying in the lap of the fairest and sweetest maid. You will see how great is the divine goodness, which seeks above all else that you should not despair. Trust him! Trust him! Here is the Child in whom is salvation. (Roland H. Bainton, *The Martin Luther Christmas Book*, p. 40)

My little sermon this evening, then, is a variation on Luther's theme. Luther observes that divinity might terrify us and inexpressible majesty might crush us, but who can fear a baby? So come to Baby Jesus, each of you.

My variation goes like this: A palace might intimidate us, a cathedral might dwarf us, but who can hesitate to enter a stable? Shepherds do not hesitate, but stride right in. Even the ox and donkeys and hens meander right in. Poor people seeking shelter from the cold are welcome there. If a soldier or a king or a president wanders in, so much the better. The Christ Child is happy for their visit too. High and low, rich and poor, saint and sinner, they are all welcome to enter a stable and walk right up to the holy manger of baby Jesus.

Earlier this good month of December, a group of us from this church went to nearby Lenox Hill Hospital to sing Christmas carols. We do it each year. I think that both the patients and the nursing staff like it when we come singing our carols. One of the carols we sang was “The Little Drummer Boy.” I like that little drummer boy. Always have! My heart goes out to the humility of the lad — the way he fears that he has no good gift to give Baby Jesus:

Little baby
Pa rum pum pum pum
I am a poor boy too
Pa rum pum pum pum
I have no gift to bring
Pa rum pum pum pum
That’s fit to give our King
Pa rum pum pum pum,
rum pum pum pum,
rum pum pum pum

So I sympathize with the poverty of the little drummer boy. But even more I applaud his going ahead and doing what he can:

Shall I play for you
Pa rum pum pum pum
On my drum

And he does! He does not give up, he does not go away, he does not fail to give what he can to Baby Jesus:

Mary nodded
Pa rum pum pum pum
The ox and lamb kept time
Pa rum pum pum pum
I played my drum for Him
Pa rum pum pum pum
I played my best for Him
Pa rum pum pum pum,
rum pum pum pum,

rum pum pum pum
Then He smiled at me
Pa rum pum pum pum
Me and my drum

You do not need to be rich to enter a stable. You can be a poor drummer boy. You can be lame, injured, weak with illness like the people at Lenox Hill Hospital, but you are welcome to this stable — the stable of the One who is our Great Physician of body and soul.

It would have been nice if the innkeeper had been willing to make space for the Holy Family. The man had some resources. In fact, few of us actually owe an inn. Many of us city people do not even own our apartments. I own no inn, and you might not either. So, we have no inn we can offer Baby Jesus. No matter. We can still offer our hearts. We can still make room for Jesus in our lives. We might be lowly folk in various ways, but if Jesus can enter a stable, he can enter our hearts and our lives too.

You might say, “No, I am unworthy that he should come and dwell with me. My heart is not a calm and peaceful place. In fact, I have a wild heart — hard for me to control.” But let it be so. The beasts themselves are welcome in the Christmas stable. The ancient rumor about Jesus was that he was a “friend of sinners” (Luke 7:34, for example). Upright folk were offended by this large-heartedness of Jesus, but publicans and sinners and prostitutes rejoiced in it. There was room in their hearts for Jesus. They did not turn him away. And in letting Jesus into their hearts, they began the path toward becoming better. Some of them became great saints of the church, like Mary Magdalene. Every one of them had the chance to become better, if only they would give Jesus a place in their hearts.

You might say, “Oh, but I am moody and variable! I am unreliable. I might welcome Jesus into my life today, but tomorrow cast him out to make room for my old vices and my old ways.” Let it be so. Let it be true that at this point in your life, you are unreliable and fickle. Even so, you can become better. And if you should doubt your ability to give Jesus a secure home in your life, well, that simply means that you join many of us who all too inconstant, whose faith has fallen too many times, and who have let Jesus down over and over again. Let all that be true, yet turn to him again. If you want Jesus in your life, he will in no wise cast you out (John 6:37). We are speaking of daily repentance and amendment of life. That is what the Christian life is — it is continual failure to love Jesus as we ought, with daily need to confess our sins and to start all over again, trying once again to rise up to a new and righteous life like his. It is a continual failing, yet striving nonetheless after a holy life. And for many of us, it is a holy rhythm that will lead us on to being better people — more Christ-like people.

You might say, “Oh, but I am just a child. Surely I am too young to give a place for Jesus in my heart.” That is what the little drummer boy seemed to fear: “I am a poor *boy* too, Pa rum pum pum pum.” But Mary nodded to the boy, inviting him to go ahead, and Baby Jesus smiled at him, him and his drum. If you are old

enough to be happy about the birth of Jesus, you are old enough to start living for him. Later in the story of Jesus, the disciples will try to shoo away the children from Jesus, but he would have no part of that:

¹⁴but Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 19:14, RSV)

And finally you might object, “But I have responsibilities in this world. I have employees to take care of, I have a family to take care of, I have friends I must not neglect.” Ah, dear people of this Christmas congregation, here is the best news of all: Making a place for Jesus in your heart will not amount to betraying your friends or employees or family, but rather will be their best blessing. Jesus will bring a new gentleness to you and a new nobility. Giving Jesus a place in your life could turn out to be the best gift ever you can give to the people dear to you.

You have come to church on this Christmas Eve. You might have traveled a ways to get here this evening. Many of your faces are familiar to me. It is an annual joy to see so many of you on Christmas Eve. But it will be a joy to see you on other occasions too — both those times when you are well and happy and simply want to worship our triune God, or those times when you are struggling or ill or guilt-ridden. Come to church always — if not here, then somewhere — and in that way, make a place for Jesus in your life — renew a place for Jesus in your heart.

Divinity might terrify us and inexpressible majesty might crush us, a palace might intimidate us and a cathedral might dwarf us. But there are no guards on duty at the stable in Bethlehem. Entrance is free and easy. “Ask, and it will be given you,” says Jesus. “Seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” Indeed, knock on the door of this stable in Bethlehem, walk right in, and make yourself a friend and a follower of the Christ Child, to whom belongs with the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.