

Six sheep, five angels, four shepherds, three innkeepers, three wise people, two narrators, and one Holy Family. Twenty-four kids and two adults, dressed up in sheets and wings and felt and glitter, all to bring the story of Jesus' birth to life at our 5:00 service earlier this evening.

Why is it that so many of us love Christmas pageants? I know I do – I LOVE a good Christmas pageant – I even love a bad one. Sometimes they're funnier that way. Is that it? Do we love watching three-year olds wearing sheep's ears, or hearing a lisping narrator's voice proclaim 'Glory to God in the highest?' Are we delighted by the joy of little girls and boys who, once a year, get to put on angels' wings and dance around the altar?

Yes, and then some.

"Joseph went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, and the angel of the Lord stood before them, and suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host praising God, and the shepherds said to one another, let us go now to Bethlehem to see this thing!"

There is so much drama in the Christmas story – so many parts to be played, lines to be spoken. Incredible gravity, drawing everyone out on a journey, out of Nazareth, out of the fields, out from heaven itself, and towards the manger to witness this thing that has happened.

It begs to be performed, this great story. It begs to be imagined.

The question is, who are we?

What part do we play?

Perhaps we are the Three Kings. I've been thinking about this a lot lately, and I spoke some about it last Saturday. The props and the costumes around Saint Timothy's tend to point to that – we are often in the place of the gift-bearers, the ones who have come to worship and greet the baby Jesus with joy and gratitude. We do such a great job with generosity and gift-bearing here at St. Timothy's – it seems to be in our very nature. The Angel Tree was cheerfully taken on; a birthday party was thrown at the Detention Center; children's belts and #2 pencils were brought on short notice for kids at the Sigel School. "Star of Wonder, Star of Night, guide us to thy Perfect Light." We come to the manger, hands full of gifts, ready to worship our king.

This perspective of generosity, of being in the place of 'the giver,' is echoed in one of the most-played pop Christmas songs on the radio –Do They Know It's Christmas. It's a song that is almost impossible to avoid at this time of year – you know, the one that has the refrain 'Feed the World'? It was performed in 1984 by a star-studded cast including Bono and Sting in order to raise money for famine victims in Ethiopia. In this song, we are told that 'in our world of plenty we can spread a smile of joy,' and that it is imperative that we let the people in Africa know that 'it's Christmastime again,' ostensibly by donating to famine relief. This song was wildly successful, going straight to #1 on the charts at Christmastime in 1984 – and it ultimately raised millions of dollars for famine relief. Not too shabby!

We are inundated, from the radio, from TV and often from our own church with this message that 'giving is the meaning of Christmas'. The songs and ad campaigns that focus on giving - I think they together reflect pretty squarely where we tend to place ourselves at Christmastime – we are the cheerful givers, the joyous hosts, proclaiming the message of Christ's birth by spreading generosity and love to those around us.

I love to be in that place – the thrill of finding and wrapping up the perfect present is

one of my favorite things. I feel pretty good about myself when I am throwing a party or giving charity gifts at Christmas, and I feel that I am living out Christ's message of joy and gift when I do these things.

But ...

Are we the three Kings in the Christmas story? Who are we as we approach the manger?

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them a light has shined. For the yoke of their burden has been lifted. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us."

The grace of God itself, we are told, has appeared. For us.

It is harder to be the people who walked in darkness. Harder to be the shepherds who were living in the cold fields, than it is to be the Three Kings bearing gifts. It is less comfortable to be the ones searching for lodging, weary and in need. And yet, undeniably, we are. We feel such joy at Christmas not because Jesus is the last, best guest at our party – the coup de grace of another successful Christmas season – but because Jesus' coming fulfills our deepest longings.

For unto us, a child has been born; unto us a son has been given. He is named Wonderful Counselor, for we need guidance in our lost-ness. He is named Mighty God, for we need protection in our weak-ness. He is named Everlasting Father, for we need strength in our fearful-ness. He is named Prince of Peace, for we need deep peace in our frenzied wandering.

The people who walked in darkness that night so long ago in Bethlehem – it was

because of this darkness that they were able to see the light. The star of the East became visible in the blackness; the light that shone forth from the manger was brighter to the shepherds who lived in the cold, dark fields.

There are things we see in the darkness that we would not otherwise see. I often walk my dog around my neighborhood at night, because it is so peaceful. The traffic is quiet, the streets are calm, and I feel like I'm the only person on earth. Walking in the darkness, it is a bit lonely; but I always notice the light pouring out of people's windows; the vignettes of families seen through the glass; the porchlights that are on. It is out in that darkness that we are most grateful for the light that greets us as we return home.

While we may be the Three Kings as easily as we are the shepherds, it is not for our own gifts that we sing 'Glory to God in the Highest!' alongside of the angels. It is for the light – the light that shines forth to us, and to every nation and people – the light that shines forth from the manger, guiding us onward to greet our savior with joy.

Amen.