

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,*

*'Glory to God in the highest heaven,*

*and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

“Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place,” said the shepherds.

But the shepherds didn't have to go into town to see the baby. After all, they were on the clock, and they had responsibilities and bills to pay. They could have just as

easily have said, “Huh, that was strange,” and gone right back to tending their sheep. But they went a little bit out of their way. They risked a little bit of social awkwardness. They took a few extra minutes, and went to pay a visit to a new family.

But if the shepherds hadn't gone into town, if they hadn't been willing to take a little bit of trouble, who knows how the world would have known about the birth of the Messiah?

The fancy, formal theological name for Christmas is the Feast of the Incarnation. As John's gospel puts it, on this day, we remember that the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

The Word became flesh.

When you really stop and think about it, it's absolutely mind-boggling that the God of the universe, the God who is the Alpha and the Omega, the God who created all that is and sets the stars and the planets on their course, would go to such trouble as to come and live among us. God came, in the flesh, full of grace and truth, and lived among us. That is what the Church has been proclaiming on this day for over 2,000 years now, and that is the reason for the season, as they say.

And it's easy, in the middle of all the lights and food and merry-making, to lose sight of that foundational truth that we claim about who God is, who we are, and what the nature of our relationship is with each other.

The scandal of the gospel, the scandal of the incarnation, is that God came to us in the most vulnerable possible way. And the scandal of the gospel is that the infant Jesus was so vulnerable that he was totally

dependent on the kindness and generosity of others for his every need.

I like to think that Jesus grew up knowing the story of his own birth. I like to think that Joseph and Mary told Jesus the story of this night when he was a little boy.

I like to think that as he was growing up, Joseph and Mary told Jesus about how strangers had gone out of their way to show God's loving kindness to them in when they were most in need. Years later, when he was grown, Jesus taught his followers that when they give food to the hungry and provide a drink to those who are thirsty, when they give clothing to those who are cold, when they take care of those who are sick and visit those who are shut inside, when they go to the trouble to show that they care, they're doing those things to Jesus himself.

Years ago, I was riding in the car with a colleague. She was driving, and we pulled up to a stoplight, and there was a man standing in the median holding a cardboard sign. My friend rolled down her window, and I was drawing a breath to go into a lecture about how sometimes giving cash is not helpful because it might enable a destructive behavior. But before I could speak, she reached down under her seat and produced a can of soup, a small tin of fruit, and a bottle of water. She handed them out the window and offered a smile and some kind words, and the man took them, offered his thanks, and the light turned green and we were on our way.

Here was a woman who was taking Jesus at his word. Here was a woman who knew that when she spent a few extra dollars at the grocery store on soup and fruit cups and bottled water, when she went to the

trouble of loading into her car, and when she took the trouble to roll down her window and offer kindness to a stranger, she wasn't doing that for a random man on the street. She didn't do it out of a sense of obligation or guilt. She went out of her way because Jesus teaches that when we go out of our way to show kindness, when we go out of our way to tend to those who are overlooked and forgotten, Jesus takes it personally.

So what might it look like for you? What part will you play in the Christmas story? Maybe you're the people of Bethlehem. Maybe you have a chance, even in the middle of all the busyness and the crowds, to take a few extra minutes of time to offer hospitality and welcome to a stranger. Maybe you're like the shepherds. Maybe you have a chance to risk a little awkwardness, a little hostility, to share the good news of the gospel with someone in your community. Maybe you're like the magi, and God has brought you to such a position for just such a time as this, to give extravagantly to those in great need.

Whatever the case may be, you have a part to play in this story. And that's the scandal of the gospel, too. The incarnation of God on earth, the birth of our Savior, requires human help.

So may we enter the story anew this day. May we step out of our own lives long enough to see the face of God in a stranger. May we take those few extra minutes. May we go that extra mile. May we give generously, not because it's the right thing to do, and not out of obligation or guilt, but because by doing so, we are giving to none other than Jesus himself.

Thanks be to God. Amen.