

CHRISTMAS DAY

“How Far to Bethlehem?”

Luke 2:1-20

In her book entitled, “*How Far to Bethlehem?*” Norah Lufts imaginately tells the story of how the main characters of the Christmas story came to be in Bethlehem. She tells of how Mary and Joseph traveled the 90 miles from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea and the problems that the very pregnant mother of our Lord and her husband encountered along the way. She tells the story of the shepherds who traveled only 2 miles to worship the newborn babe in Bethlehem at the direction of the angels. She tells the story of the three men from the east: Melchior, an ancient astronomer who traveled 1600 miles following the star, and Gaspar, a rich ruler from the city of Jexel, and Balthazar, a slave who came along.

She contrasts these characters with others like Herod, who lived only 8 miles away from Bethlehem in Jerusalem, but who because of jealousy, anger, and suspicion never did make the trip to find the Savior. And the innkeeper’s wife who felt that the birth of a baby in her barn was too much of an imposition and never even went to see. And the Roman soldiers who were too busy to even notice what was going on and never went either.

In the end, Lufts’ book made one thing perfectly clear. Geography and distance had nothing to do with anyone getting to Bethlehem. The difference between those who went to Bethlehem and found the Savior and those who didn’t was found in the heart of each character.

And, if you stop to think about it, that’s the way it is today as well. The message of Christmas, namely that the Savior of the world has been born, goes out again even today and with that message comes the invitation to come, to come and see what has come to pass, to come and see your Savior, and seeing, to worship. The heart of those who hear that message will determine how far it is for them to Bethlehem today.

For those modern day Herod’s or innkeeper’s wives or soldiers, Bethlehem might as well be a million miles away. They are the ones whose self-absorption or bitterness or preoccupation or just downright indifference means they will not really take the message of Christmas to heart. To them Christmas will make no difference.

But to those who like Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the wise men, who take the message of Christmas to heart, it can and will make all the difference in the world.

The story is told of two brothers – one who lived on a farm and the other who lived in a small town nearby. They hadn’t spoken in years, ever since their father died. But on Christmas Eve something changed. They both heard, in their own churches, the story of

God's love for an estranged and alienated world once again, of how He made the first move to reconcile people to Himself, of how He gave His best and His all on that first Christmas, and, for the brothers, the Christmas message finally hit home. Later that night, they each, unbeknownst to the other, decided to take the first step in reconciling themselves to each other. And so the one who lived in town started out to go to his brother's house on the farm and the one who lived on the farm started out to go to his brother's house in town. They met halfway in-between. At first they stood in silence but then they ran and hugged each other. "Merry Christmas," they each said to the other. And at that very moment they knew they had made it to Bethlehem for the love of the Christ child was born-anew in their hearts that night.

If one will but believe the message of the angels, that a Savior has been born in Bethlehem, one will find that Bethlehem is really just as near as one's heart.

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts in human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming; but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in."

It is my hope and prayer that each and every one of us here this morning will go once again to Bethlehem and, in that, see what God has done and that, by faith, the Christ may be reborn in our hearts and lives once again and that that Christ may live and grow in us throughout the coming year.

May you all have a most blessed Christmas as you make your way to Bethlehem. In the name of the Christ of Christmas. Amen.