



The Journey to Bethlehem Pilgrims' Guide by Pastor Keith

To listen along to Pastor Keith's audio recordings of his reflections for each station, go to our website at udlc.org/christmas. The recordings and the following text are the same.

We highly recommend listening along, if you are able.

First Stop: The Star of Bethlehem

Hi everyone and welcome to The Journey to Bethlehem! I'm Pastor Keith and I'll be your guide as we journey through the Christmas story. First, I want to wish you and yours a very Merry Christmas and Blessed New Year. I know this is a different kind of Christmas celebration for us, but in some ways it brings us *even closer* to the story of Christmas, where Joseph and Mary were themselves alone, distant from family and friends. They, too, had to be outside, in a stable, because they could not be inside. And despite all this, they also found wonderful and unexpected blessings that were made known to them by the shepherds and wise men, and which Mary pondered in her heart. Now, more than ever, we need to *hear* and *feel* and *know* that this

Jesus, born at Christmas, is our Emmanuel, which means “God with us.”

Jesus is born time and again into every place and every time where darkness and despair seek to take root and steal our hope and joy.

Our first stop tonight is the Star of Bethlehem, which was made for us by Mo Redding. This was the “star of wonder, star of night, Star with royal beauty bright,” that led the wise men to the manger. We’ll meet the wise men a little later, but we start with the Bethlehem Star because it reminds us that, in the words of the Gospel of John, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” It feels like there is so much darkness and despair in the world right now, and it threatens our sense of hope and expectation, but the Christmas story shows us this is where precisely where God’s light shines the brightest—like a brilliant star radiating against the dark night sky. At Christmas, the light of Christ shines into our short days and long nights. It shines into our worries, troubles, questions, and lament, and it also intensifies all our experiences of goodness, joy, and love. Our thanks to Carol Evans and our Chancel Choir and the Voices of Gwynedd from Gwynedd Mercy University for the music from Joel Raney’s Christmas musical, *Peace*. Please pull forward to the Inn at Bethlehem.



Second Stop: The Inn at Bethlehem

Welcome to the Inn at Bethlehem where there is absolutely, positively no vacancy! No room for you! Mary and Joseph finally arrived in Bethlehem from their long journey from their home in Nazareth. They had travelled far and Mary was about to give birth at any time. Yet, they could not find a place to rest. All the inns and AirBnbs and VRBOs in Bethlehem were full because the Roman Empire, which ruled the Holy Land in this time, had forced everyone to return to their ancestral home to be counted for a census. As it says in the Gospel of Luke:

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he

was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

People all across the land were forced to travel from their homes, and because so many people flooded into Bethlehem, there was no room left in any of the inns. Although their ancestors had come from the same place, Bethlehem, it is quite likely that many of them were strangers to one other and that the innkeepers were simply overwhelmed. According to the Romans, they were all home. And yet, they weren't truly home. Not at all. But Jesus, who had no place to lay his head, made his home there among humanity, so that then, now, and always, we may find our true home in God. It reminds me of how psychotherapist Carl Jung hung a sign over the door of his home which said, “Bidden or unbidden, God is here,” which meant that ready or not, whether we are aware or not, whether we feel prepared or worthy or not, whether there is room or not, God still comes to us, meeting us *where* and *as* we are. And thank God for that. Thanks to Mo Redding for creating this scene for us. Please pull forward and to the right to the Shepherds display.



Third Stop: The Shepherds

Luke tells us that “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 Savior, 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 favors!” 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.”

When angels show up in the Bible, things get real, really fast. We tend to think of angels as very gentle and serene, but typically when angels show up

in the Bible people's first reaction is fear. They are afraid—and who wouldn't be, especially if you were a shepherd under the dark night sky, which suddenly cracked open giving way to the heavenly host—or, back where the Christmas story really began, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and announced that she would bear God's Son. Mary and the Shepherds were both scared. The shepherds were terrified. That is why the angels say to them, "Do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid." How we also need to hear those words this Christmas. Do not be afraid. God is with us. Do not be afraid. God will make a way. Do not be afraid. You are not alone. Do not be afraid. "All things are possible with God." Now, go with the shepherds to the manger and see this holy and miraculous thing that has taken place.

Thanks to the Walter family, who lent us their Shepherd display for this program. Mary Walter actually created this for her mother years ago and they have been displaying it on their lawn each Christmas ever since. We are honored to share it with you tonight. Please pull forward to the manger.



Fourth Stop: Away in the Manger

So the shepherds “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.”

Here, we, with Mary, ponder the miracle of Christmas. The great God of the Universe, the Creator of All Things, out of boundless compassion and unconditional love for us comes to us...as a Baby. Not a booming voice from the heavens, nor a burning bush, not an earthquake or storm, but as a newborn child, who we could pick up and hold and rock in our arms.

I have had more experience with babies than I ever expected, having four children of our own. I remember so fondly those times of holding our little babies while they were napping and feeling their heart and my heart beating together. Just so, in these moments at the manger, we can feel our heart and God’s heart beating together. This scene of the manger is an image of just how much God loves us and desires to be in relationship with us. This is the

place where, as the old hymn goes, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

Let’s conclude this time at the manger with a prayer adapted from Pope John XXIII, “O sweet Child of Bethlehem, grant that we may share with all our hearts in this profound mystery of Christmas. Put into our hearts this peace for which we sometimes seek so desperately and which you alone can give to us. Help us to know one another better, and to live as siblings, children of the same parentage. Reveal to us also your beauty, holiness, and purity. Awaken in our hearts love and gratitude for your infinite goodness. Join us all together in your love. And give us your heavenly peace. Amen.

Our deep thanks to the Kenney family for donating our beautiful Christmas trees every year. Please pull forward to visit the Three Wise Men.



Fifth Stop: We Three Kings

Some time after the shepherds had departed the manger “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen,” the three wise men, also known as the three kings, or the magi journeyed to Bethlehem with their three prescient gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold fit for a king. As the song We Three Kings goes, “Gold I bring to crown Him again / King forever, ceasing never / Over us all to reign.” Frankincense, a symbol of Jesus’ priestly role. And Myrrh to foreshadow Jesus’s suffering, death, and resurrection. “Myrrh is mine, it's bitter perfume / Breaths a life of gathering gloom / Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding dying / Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.”

Matthew tells their story like this: “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea.” ...Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and

search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

I love how it says in this part of the Christmas story that the magi were “overwhelmed by joy.” They had travelled so far, following the star, and, finally arriving at a lowly manger, and encountering this baby, the promised Messiah, they were overwhelmed by joy. Can you think of a time when you were overcome with joy? It is sort of like not being able to stop laughing, or tearing up out of sheer gratitude, or feeling lost and yet fully found in the same moment. They were overwhelmed with joy.

The story goes, to avoid King Herod, they went home by another road, another way. This joy changed them and they did not go back the same way or as the same people after encountering the Christ child.

Tonight, let us return home by another road. Not literally, although you may want to take the scenic route and take in some Christmas lights, but certainly spiritually. Let us go from this place rejoicing and making known all we have seen and heard, knowing that in Jesus, God has made God's home with us, wherever we go, whatever we do, whatever the world throws at us, God is with us always and so there is nothing to fear.

Thanks to Carol Evans and Sharon Schmidt for putting together our three kings with their three gifts.

Finally, thank *you* fellow pilgrims, for joining on this journey to Bethlehem. We hope you've enjoyed it and feel a little more strongly the promise and the hope of Christmas. You may pull in and park and share in Communion here overlooking the manger or take it home. Either way, we have another

recording and some prayers and a blessing for you to share with this holy meal.

Tonight, I pray: “May you be filled with the wonder of Mary, the obedience of Joseph, the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the determination of the magi, and the peace of the Christ child. Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit bless you now and forever.” Amen and Merry Christmas!



Sixth Stop: Holy Communion

These Communion kits were consecrated on the altar during our worship this past Sunday. They contain bread and grape juice. Peel the bottom tab with the bread first and take it out and then peel back top tab for the grape juice.

Gathering around this holy meal, we celebrate new life being brought to birth, and we recall so many stories that are shared around meals this time of year: At tables where bread is broken and the cup is poured out, where

families gather and generations share, where stories are remembered, refined, and reshaped.

Gathering around this meal on this holy night, we remember the story of God's sacred daring to share our life, the story of the holy, Jesus, donning human flesh and dwelling among us, a story that is at once both ethereal and earthly.

Gathering around this meal on this Christmas night, we break the bread and remember the paradox that it is in our brokenness that we become whole; that it is in out of our vulnerability that we rise strong. We share this cup and remember the abundance discovered in each new sharing of our sacred stories, with particular thanksgiving this year for the opportunity to share it in a new way.

Together, around this meal, we pray: Come, Holy Spirit, come. Bless this bread and bless this fruit of the vine. Bless all of us in our eating and drinking that our eyes might be opened, that we might recognize Jesus being born and

the Spirit rising in our midst indeed, in one another. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Amen. (Prayer adapted from Katherine Hawkerself)

Please share in this meal.

And finally, receive this Christmas blessing: May the Creator, who has loved the eternal Son from before the foundation of the world, shed that love upon you as God's beloved child and children.

May Christ, who by his incarnation gathered into one all things both earthly and heavenly, fill you with joy and peace. May the Holy Spirit, by whose overshadowing Mary became the God-bearer, give you grace to carry the good news of Christ.

And may the blessing God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer bless you today and always and keep you in eternal life. Amen.

