

First Presbyterian Church, Sylacauga, AL  
The Rev. James B. Stanford III  
November 29, 2009

Luke 2:14  
"The Signs of Christmas"

*"And this shall be a sign unto you: you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger." (Luke 2:12)*

### The Singing of Carols (Chandler Thrash)

One of the first signs of Christmas is "a song in the air" ... familiar Christmas music ... songs you have loved in the past and can sing the words to.

An old carol says: "On Christmas night all Christians sing, to tell the news the angels bring." Christians have sung about Christmas from the fourteenth century onward, with words that were sometimes tender and sometimes merry, but always simple and honest, set to happy tunes that suggest joy and happiness.

Many of the traditional carols were composed between 1400 and 1700. In the eighteenth century, the town people often carried these tunes from door to door, lighting their way with lanterns and playing upon wind instruments. Carolers or carol-singers still go on their rounds. Sometimes it is a group of youth or children that sing the traditional carols. Or it might be a group from the congregation, representing all ages, who travel by car to the homes of friends, sharing the spirit of Christmas through the gift of music.

May we continue to find the meaning and beauty of Christmas in the singing of carols. We will now sing the first verses of four familiar carols as we express the joy of celebrating our Lord's birthday.

### The Legend of the Evergreens (Carlee Gardner)

Another sign that Christmas is coming is the use of greenery inside. In fall, when all the earth is turning brown, evergreens stand in lonely vigil until the earth again is green. Evergreens shout to us about the hoped-for coming of green again, reminding us of joyous hope, the eternal presence of the Christ child.

Legend tells us that long ago, evergreens were not forever colored with verdant leaves. Before the birth of Jesus, the evergreen was bare like other trees around. Let's begin this legend with events recorded in the book of Matthew.

An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling him to take the infant Jesus and his mother to Egypt until it was safe for them to return. Herod was sending his

soldiers out to kill the baby. So Mary, Joseph, and Jesus left the security of their homeland and journeyed to Egypt without telling any of their family.

Over rocky hills and dusty roads they traveled wearily, Mary and the baby probably on the back of a donkey, Joseph walking beside them. They traveled all night and into the next day. Mid-afternoon, Joseph noticed dust in the distance behind them. Fast-riding soldiers were coming; soldiers sent by Herod to carry out his dreadful mission.

Where could they hide? Where would they find protection? According to the legend, the hillside was barren, offering no shield. Quickly, Joseph guided Mary and her child into a clump of cedars on a hill. Immediately, the bare cedar twigs greened with color, thickened with growth to shield the holy family. The white berries of the cedar turned to sapphire blue to match the robe Mary was wearing.

Herod's soldiers went right on past, never seeing, never knowing that Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus were safely sheltered in a clump of green cedars with berries of sapphire blue.

Since that day, cedars and plants like them have never shed their leaves, never lost their green, for they sheltered the holy family. Ever-green, ever-lasting, eternal; green branches are part of our preparation—a symbol of hope, a reminder of love received. Evergreens are a symbol of the eternal and everlasting God.

### The Advent Wreath and Candles (Bailee Curtis and Shelby Sorensen)

Advent is a time of expectation, and this is a four-week period of preparation, but also by the signs of candles and wreaths. The lighting of a candle in the Advent Wreath for each Sunday of the season marks the coming of Christmas. The flame of each new candle reminds us, who have come to worship, that something is happening, and something more is still to come.

The candles are arranged in a circle to remind us of the continuous power of God, which knows neither beginning nor ending. There is also symbolism in the colors of the candles. The three purple candles symbolize the coming of Christ from the royal line of David. He is coming as the King of Kings as well as the Prince of Peace. The large white candle in the center is known as the Christ candle, and points to Jesus as the Christ, the Light of the world. The end of Advent arrives as we light the Christ Candle on Christmas Eve. We join in rejoicing that the promise of long ago has been fulfilled.

For the Christmas season light is a symbol, beginning with the star that guided the wise men to the manger where the Christ child lay. The light of candles has always been considered as the symbol of the light Jesus brought to earth. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world."

The Christmas candles light up our souls and we carry forth the message of that light in our lives: that Christ will be born again, not in a manger, but within the hearts of all.

### A Candy Maker's Witness (Dottie Lessley)

A candy maker in Indiana (U.S.) wanted to make a candy that would be a witness, so he made the Christmas candy cane. He incorporated several symbols into the candy cane that represented the birth, ministry, and death of Jesus.

He began with a stick of pure white, hard candy. White symbolized the virgin birth and the sinless nature of Jesus, and hardness symbolized the solid rock, the foundation of the church, and firmness of the promises of God.

The candy maker made the candy in the form of a "J" to represent the precious name of Jesus, who came to earth as our savior. It could also represent the staff of the good shepherd, with which he reaches down into the ditches of the world to lift out the fallen lambs who, like all sheep, have gone astray.

Thinking that the candy was somewhat plain, the candy maker stained it with red stripes. He used three small stripes to show the stripes of the scourging Jesus received, by which we are healed. The large red stripe was for the blood shed by Christ on the cross so that we could have the promise of eternal life.

Unfortunately, the candy became known as a candy cane, a meaningless decoration seen at Christmastime. But the meaning is still there for those who have "eyes to see and ears to hear." May this symbol again be used to witness to the wonder of Jesus and his great love that came down at Christmas and remains the ultimate and dominant force in the universe today.

Today, we'll share candy canes with everyone, one that is a witness of our Lord. The children will help pass them out to everyone. Whether you eat it or put it in a prominent place, remember the symbolism that is used in its preparation.

### The Story of the Nativity Scene (Pastor Jim)

The crèche is one of the wondrous signs of Christmas. The story of the Christmas nativity scene, also called a crèche, goes back many centuries. Saint Francis of Assisi made it popular. He spent his life preaching, caring for the poor and sick, and teaching people to see beauty in all creatures.

Saint Francis tried for many years to explain the Christmas story to poor country folks. While they enjoyed the holiday feasting and merrymaking, they never could understand the true meaning of Christmas.

Finally, in 1223, Saint Francis thought of a plan. He sent word to the towns and countryside near Assisi; "Come and keep Christmas with me." So on Christmas Eve, he led the people to a rocky cave near the town of Creccio. They carried candles and torches to light the way. When they saw the surprise Saint Francis had prepared for them, they cried out in wonder. There in the cave was a manger filled with fresh hay; a live ox and donkey stood beside the manger; real people took the parts of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds, and a life-sized wax baby lay in the manger.

Saint Francis explained the story as he showed it, how a poor king born in a stable had brought hope of a better life to everyone. His listeners now began to realize the beauty of the Christmas message. The cave rang with music as he led the worshipers in joyful singing.

The next year, these people set up their own manger scenes. The custom quickly spread throughout Italy, and then on to other parts of Europe. It helped make Christmas more popular among poor people and country folk.

The first crèches were very simple, often using live animals and people. Through the years, these figures have been made from wood, clay, wax, or other materials. Animals have always been in these scenes. Legend has it that animals were there at Bethlehem to worship the Christ child, and the legend says that at midnight when Christ was born, they were able to talk.

The Nativity speaks of the mystery of God's wisdom. God reached out to all people including the poor and wealthy, the simple and the wise, the powerless and the powerful. All who found him knelt in humility before him. Knowing God is possible because He came to us, at our level. Whenever we see a Nativity we find ourselves overwhelmed by God's expression of love in coming to us. Our nativity scene will be complete on Christmas Eve, when baby Jesus arrives.

### Meditation (Pastor Jim)

Two Americans has been invited by the Russian Department of Education to come and teach morals and ethics to various groups. They found themselves near Christmas at an orphanage with about 100 boys and girls, children who had been abandoned, abused and left in the care of a government-run program. The two Americans decided they would tell the Christmas story, a story most of the orphans had never heard.

They told the orphans about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem and how, because there was no room, they had to sleep in the stable where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger. Throughout the story, they noticed how the children and staff sat in amazement as they listened, trying to grasp every word.

When they finished, they gave each child small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger, as well as a yellow napkin to carefully tear into strips to make straw to fill the manger. Small squares of flannel from a worn out nightgown were used for the baby's blanket. And a doll-size baby was cut from tan felt that they happened to have brought with them.

As the orphans were busy assembling the mangers, the Americans moved among them to see if they needed any help. All was well, until one came to a little boy named Misha who looked to be about 6 years old. He had finished his project, and as the American looked into the little boy's manger, he was surprised to see not one, but two babies in the manger.

Concerned that the child had not understood the story, a translator was called over to ask the boy why there were two babies on the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and staring at the completed manger, the child began to repeat the Christmas story. For having heard it only one time, he was amazingly accurate in the details ... until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to make up his own ending to the story.

He said, "And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift! So I asked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?" And Jesus told me, "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me." And with tears in his eyes, Misha finishes his story: "So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and told me I would stay with him ... forever."

How amazing ... for an orphan to have found someone who would never abandon him ... never abuse him ... someone who would stay with him ... forever. All the while, you and I take it for granted; it is summed up in our one word --- Immanuel --- God with us!

I'm wearing a different stole this morning. It is one that I got in 1984 when I made a trip to Israel. When I use it, I remember that trip ... out on the Sea of Galilee ... the mount called Calvary ... and the shepherds fields near Bethlehem with its caves that could have easily been the Christ Child's stable.

You stand there on a starry night and imagine shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks. You know the story: an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord was shining over them, terrifying the shepherds. They were "sore afraid," the story said, especially when the multitude of the heavenly hosts started to sing.

**But what about the sheep? With all of that going on, what were the sheep doing? With a burst of great light and singing angels, sheep must have been running all over the countryside. Those shepherds would have had to run all around chasing sheep ... gathering them up ...finishing their chores. I'm surprised any of them ever made it to see "the infant lying in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes."**

**Today, we are the shepherds. We come to this season with high expectations. We expect our families to be happy ... our kids to be grateful ... our loved ones to be generous. We want to be warm and safe and loved ... and all the while our culture tries to convince us that we deserve this fantasy and that with the proper purchasing power it can indeed be ours.**

**Yet, the reality is that, like the shepherds, we end up chasing our flock all over the hillside ... trying to gather up things that don't want to be gathered ... finishing chores that always seem to require more time than we have to give ... and if we're not careful ... we can miss the sign that God gives.**

**Every Christmas God sends a sign ... a sign about the gift of a Savior ... the mighty God in a manger. Can we see it? Can we hear it?**

**Also, like the shepherds, we must take the sign in ... allow it to become a personal word from God. The angels told the shepherds: " ... for TO YOU is born a Savior who is Christ the Lord ... and this shall be a sign FOR YOU ..." Not only must we see and hear the sign, but we must understand that it was meant for us - -- for our life, for our heart, for our hopes. If God has a sign for you, you must not miss it!**

**God's sign brings the power of the personal ... for it is a personal sign for you. The shepherds saw it and heard it ... little Misha saw it and heard it. Do you see it and hear it?**

**Friends, this is where faith enters, because it is faith that enables us to take the meaning ... the intention ... the purpose of the message of scripture into our life and make it real ... make it ours. Over the Thanksgiving holiday, I watched some Christmas movies on the Hallmark network. I understand that beginning at noon each day from now to Christmas they will show Christmas movie after Christmas movie. That's great, but all the Christmas movies you can watch won't make a difference if God's sign isn't received by faith. All the Christmas pageants in the world ... all the carols ... all the worship services ... can't do a thing for us if we don't make God's sign ours in our hearts and in our souls.**

**Amidst the scattering sheep, the angels shout the message: "TO YOU is born this day a Savior! Christ the Lord!" But then, do you know what? Those**

**angels leave, and they leave it to the shepherds to decide what to do with God's sign ... and they leave it to us to decide as well.**

**You must have faith to have the miracle of Christmas. God's sign is there for you to see and to hear, and it is a personal sign just for you.**

**Receive God's sign and God's Savior into your heart, and let God turn your life toward him.**