

NORTH AREA NOTES

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Learning From the Christmas Story

For my first Christmas on the staff of ABC/Ohio seven years ago, I wrote a message to you about some of the things we can learn from the Gospel accounts of the Christmas story about how to prepare for and celebrate Christmas. It was, without doubt, the message that has received more responses from you than any other I've ever written. That year, many of you told me that you used it for devotional presentations with groups in your churches, or for family devotions. In response to several requests, I want to share that Christmas message with you again this year...

And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Mary was, no doubt, surprised by the news that she, a virgin and unmarried woman, would bear the savior of the world. It certainly was not what she had planned, yet she was able to recognize the importance of the role she would plan in building up the Kingdom of God. What can we learn from Mary about preparing for Christmas? *No plan we make is as important as God's plan for the celebration. And all that we do to celebrate the season should glorify the Lord and cause rejoicing in the coming of the Savior.*

So Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. Imagine what that trip must have been like. We often see pictures of Mary riding a donkey, Joseph walking diligently beside her. As much as the trip must have been long and difficult, it certainly would have provided many hours for the two of them to talk and spend time together. It prepared them for what would come in Bethlehem. What can we learn from the travels of Mary and Joseph about preparing for Christmas? *Slow down. Take your time. It is easier and more pleasant if you don't rush. Enjoy the time with the people you love most.*

And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. We worry about how the house looks... should we try to get the new carpet installed by then or just have it cleaned? ... should we put a Christmas tree in both the family room and the living room, or will one be enough? These questions seem trite when we realize where the first Christmas was celebrated... in a barn with a dirt floor, the baby sleeping in a cattle feed box. What can we learn about Christmas from the location of the first one? *What the place looks like is a lot less important than what happens there. Focus on helping your family have a quiet, memorable, spiritual Christmas rather than on decorations and trappings.*

And there were in the same country, shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. Shepherds were guys that didn't bathe for long periods of time. They hung around with smelly animals. They certainly were not the most desirable people to invite to an important occasion. But they were the first to hear the good news. And they went immediately when the angels told them about the birth. What can we learn from the shepherds about getting ready for Christmas? *Be excited! Share the event with people whose lives are different from yours. Serve a meal at a soup kitchen. Adopt a nursing home resident who has no family. Remember that the Good News is for everyone!*

They bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. We pay a lot of attention to gift-buying and gift-giving at Christmas time, a custom based on the response of the wise men to the coming of the Christ Child. Their gifts were a part of their worship. What can we learn from the wise men? *Our gifts should be a form of worship as well. It is good to give gifts to those around us as a symbol of our love. But in many households Christmas has become a time of decadence and uncontrolled spending. Our very best gifts, the really precious ones, are the ones we give God and use to build up his kingdom.*

This Advent season, I encourage you and your family to pay attention to the lessons we can learn about preparing for a celebrating Christmas from the ones who celebrated the first Christmas. May this be a time of peaceful, joyful preparation for the coming of the Christ.

Have a Blessed Christmas!

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