

# Born in a Crowd

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Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, NYC

So the shepherds went with haste and found Mary and Joseph  
and the baby, lying in a manger.

Luke 2: 16

**Our children have provided the message for today.  
I certainly don't have to preach to you, after that.  
But I do get to stand up here for a few minutes and bask in the reflected glory of  
their hard work and great energy.**

**One thing became clear to me, watching today's reenactment of the birth of Jesus.**

**When our first child Jessie was born, I thought the birthing room was kind of  
crowded.  
We had two midwives and an obstetrician.  
There was a nurse and an assistant standing by.  
My mother-in-law was just outside, worrying.  
Our sisters were close at hand.  
Charlene was there, obviously.  
I was there, too, just standing around, sort of playing the part of Joseph. I thought  
it was really crowded.**

**Watching the pageant today, I see things differently.**

**We had no grimy shepherds dropping by the birthing room on their way home from  
the night shift. We had no wise persons beyond those I've already named.  
I couldn't hear any singing angels, although maybe they were there.  
There was a hospital policy forbidding barnyard animals. The IRS was nowhere to  
be seen. And there was no running, squealing star.**

**I am now profoundly grateful for all that.**

**Jesus was born in a crowd. We think of as a bucolic, peaceful scene, and it so  
wasn't.**

**Jesus was born into a random community of people who met on the spot, who  
barely knew each other.  
A random community collected by God.  
A random community of love.**

**Jesus was born into a community of people who came together for that moment,  
and who then went their own ways.**

Maybe some of them had an ongoing relationship with this child they saw lying there in a feeding trough. Most of them probably didn't.

Some of them probably took one look into little kid in rags lying in the trough and said, to themselves, that's it? And they were right, that's it. That is it. God's love turned into a human person. An amazing miracle! And one that happens every day.

And don't forget the animals. I love that ancient Latin text that goes, *O magnum mysterium...* O great mystery and incredible miracle... that animals were the first to witness the birth of Christ!

There is an old legend that says that on Christmas night bees hum the 100<sup>th</sup> psalm, but only the pure of heart can hear it. I've never heard that myself... but I can almost believe it.

One thing's clear.

The people who formed that momentary, random community left that place profoundly changed by what they saw that day. Changed so much, we're still telling their stories two millennia later.

I don't know. Maybe that random community of love is not that different from what we are in this room today. It's possible that some of you have never been in a church before, and you're not quite sure what you're doing here now. Some of you may never be in this church again, though I hope you'll feel like this is a place you'd be welcome to return anytime. Some of you are here every week. Or just about every day! And all of us have been called together by love.

Whether we know it or not, we've been called together at this time, at this place, by God.

Some of you may find yourself in the position of the shepherds—in a place and situation that is totally uncomfortable. Or like the innkeeper, disturbed & harried by the role you've been handed.

Some of us may be in the position of Joseph, hanging around wondering what to do, knowing something's happening and not so sure what it means.

Some of us are in the situation of Mary, moved beyond words, and weary beyond time.

Some of us are like the wise people, eager to bring who you are and what you have to the help of God. Or like the star, eager to just get away!

Some of us come here expecting something. Some of us come here because the stress of our life right now moves us to seek some respite or help or answer or comfort.

One thing's probably true: like the folks who gathered around Jesus, we're a random community.

This grouping of God's people will never again be together in the same room. So I want to love the fact that we're together now. And I want to pray that each of us goes out of this room today profoundly changed in some big way or small way, by something that God does with us here.

I pray that 17% of the stress that's in your life fades into the background for awhile.

I pray that you go out of here with some glimmer of hope that gives the lie to a cynical world.

I pray that you go out of here with a broader idea of who God is.

I pray that you go out of here with a broader idea of who you are!

I hope that maybe you find yourself open in some way to a different reality, the reality that there is a creative force in the universe that knows you and cares about you. Even if you feel like you've been dumped in a feeding trough surrounded by strangers.

I hope that happens, because we need it.  
Most of us desperately need it.

I hope that happens, not because of anything I say; I hope that happens because together we have seen something. Our random community has had the privilege of catching a glimpse of grace.

About quarter past ten this morning my wife Charlene came flying back home from the church screaming, "We don't have Jesus! We forgot Jesus!"

Somehow in the rush of getting everyone up and out and over here, the doll who had agreed to play the role of Jesus in the pageant got left behind. Fortunately, we live right next door. "We forgot Jesus!"

I thought to myself, Well, that's not the first time we at St. Paul and St. Andrew have been accused of forgetting Jesus.

But whether you care about him or not, whether you remember him or not, Jesus is never very far away. And Jesus never forgets about us.

**Rabbi Abraham Heschel said it best, “To have faith means to justify God’s faith in us. Faith is only the awareness of a divine mutuality, companionship and friendship.”**

**Is that it? A baby in a feeding trough, surrounded by strangers?**

**That’s it, God’s love turned into a human person.  
O great mystery!**

**An amazing miracle!**

**And one that happens every day.**