May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

When I was kid I loved the “then and there” Christmas story. You know it. It’s the one we just heard from the gospel according to St. Luke. It begins:

“*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus* ….” (Lk 2,1a)  
“*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields* ….”(Lk 2, 8a)

It’s the story about Mary and Joseph, shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night, an angel’s good news of great joy, and a newborn “child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in the manger.”

It’s the story we sing in our hymns, portray with manger scenes and read our children and grandchildren.

The older I get, the longer I live, and the more I experience the beauty and pain of life, however, the less interested I am in what happened “then and there,” “in those days” and “in that region.” I’m much more interested in what is happening “here and now,” in these days and in this region.

That’s the only Christmas story that really matters and makes a difference to us. I don’t want us to settle for just telling or celebrating the “then and there” Christmas story…, I want us to live the “here and now” Christmas story. I’m not talking about whether you and I have been born again, but whether Jesus has been born again in us.

* What good is it to us if the angel announces good news of great joy to the shepherds living in the fields if that good news is not also announced to us in the night fields of our lives?
* What good is to us if Jesus is laid in a manger in Bethlehem if he is not also born anew in us and cradled in the manger of our lives?
* What good is it to us if the shepherds go see this thing that has taken place if we do not also see in our lives this thing that has happened?
* What good is it to us if Mary treasures and ponders how these things can be if we do not also wonder at the mystery of God-with-us in our time and place?

I want to find the child lying in the manger of my life here and now, don’t you? Isn’t that why we come here this night every year?

What if you and I, our relationships, the circumstances of our lives… are the manger in which this Holy Child, the Messiah, the Lord, has been laid?

If you want to know the Child born again, born anew, in your life tonight look at the manger of your life. What do you see? What manger have you brought here tonight?

* Is it a manger of darkness? Tonight it is filled with the Light of Life.
* Is it a manger of confusion and self-doubt? Tonight it is filled with the Wonderful Counselor.
* Is it a manger of weakness and impossibility? Tonight it is filled with the Mighty God.
* Is it a manger of chaos and conflict? Tonight it is filled with the Prince of Peace.
* Is it a manger of loneliness and abandonment? Tonight it is filled with the one who said, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
* Is it a manger of guilt and regret? Tonight it is filled with the Merciful One.
* Is it a manger of fear and lostness? Tonight it is filled with the Good Shepherd.
* Is it a manger of hunger and poverty? Tonight it is filled with the Bread of Life.
* Is it a manger of thirst and desire? Tonight it is filled with the Cup of Salvation.
* Is it a manger of grief and sorrow? Tonight it is filled with the one who said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”
* Is it a manger of death and loss? Tonight it is filled with the Giver of Life.

Jesus’ manger, our manger, holds all this and more. His manger has never been emptied of its power and meaning, and never will be. It’s the place where God’s life and our life meet and intersect. Let’s not forget that a manger is a feeding trough. It’s the place where our lives are fed, sustained, and recreated in the midst of our life’s circumstances.

Can this child’s birth really change our lives? Well, let me ask you this. Did the birth of your child change your life and re-create your world? Did your birth change your parents’ lives and re-create their world? Yeah, in more ways than we can count. Whatever the manger of your humanity holds tonight, tonight it is filled with divinity.

The promise of Christmas is that we will not leave here unchanged. It might take us a while to recognize and live into this change but the promise is trustworthy and true. To us “*is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”* And that is “*good news of great joy for all the people*” in every time, in every place, and in every life; especially here and now, in these days and in this region, for you and for me.

May our Lord Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem, bless you, your families and loved ones at this blessed time of hope and grace. Mary Christmas and Happy New Year! Amen.