

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Doing the Best They Could”**

Rev. David K. Groth  
Christmas Eve, 2021

*“And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Luke 2:6-7).*

She wrapped Him in swaddling cloths. These were strips of cloth that mothers wrapped tightly around their babies to secure their fragile limbs and warm them. Mary had probably packed the swaddling cloths back in Nazareth. They were not made of silk or satin, but they were sufficient. Mary was doing the best she could for her baby under difficult circumstances.

Joseph was doing the best he could as well. He could not secure room in the inn. But he could at least clean out the manger (a feed trough for animals) and make a simple bedding of clean straw, maybe cover it with his tunic. It would keep the baby off the cold floor where insects and mice were crawling in the night. It would also help Mary to rest knowing Jesus was safe and warm. It wasn't a fine crib or cradle by any stretch, but it was the best Joseph could offer under difficult circumstances.

Later, when the angels told the shepherds that a Savior had been born for them and for all the people, they hurried off to Bethlehem and found the infant, just as the angel said they would, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. The shepherds did what they could. “They made known the saying that was told them.” That is, they told Joseph and Mary and anyone else who would listen what the angel had told them. Surely it wasn't with expansive vocabulary or poetic flourishes. These were shepherds, not Shakespeareans or classically trained singers. But they returned to their flocks glorifying and praising God with the voices and vocabulary they had.

Later still, when magi from the east were given notice from the heavens that there had been one born king of the Jews, they packed up their goods, kissed their wives goodbye, and made the long, arduous journey to pay their respects. “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy and found the child with Mary, his mother and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.” To whom much is given, much is expected, so the magi offered gifts according to their means. They offered their best. It wasn't so much that Jesus would grow up in the lap of luxury. No, he would learn a trade and work as a carpenter. But it certainly helped Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt, and shelter their precious infant from the deadly pestilence of Herod's paranoia. Moreover, the magi never returned to Herod. Instead, they returned to their own country “by another way” the text says, frustrating Herod's terrible plans for the infant Jesus.

Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, and the magi . . . all these did the best they could for the infant Jesus. What about you?

What one thing can you do this next year to give Jesus your very best? Maybe you can renew and revitalize your commitment to teach your children and grandchildren of His love? Maybe it would be good to check and correct some of the big choices in life that you are making, that you know are displeasing to Him and not so good for you. Maybe it would be to sacrifice a few of the hours in front of Amazon and Netflix and use those hours in service of others. Maybe it's time to shake off less essential obligations on the weekends, so you and your family can get down on bended knee and worship Him, as the magi did. What one thing can you offer Jesus because you love Him? What costly gift can you lay at His feet?

Maybe it's just being patient with others, who are doing the best *they* can. (It seems we could all use a little more patience these days.) I'm thinking of that elderly man driving very slowly in front of you. He shouldn't be behind the wheel anymore, and he knows it, and everyone else knows it too. But he's making his

way to the hospital to see his wife. Trouble is, you don't know any of that. All you know is he's driving very slowly in front of you, and it enrages you. But he's doing the best he can. So, instead of showing him a flash of your rage, you might do the best you can and hang back patiently and give the guy a break and maybe even pray for him.

There are so many big ways and small ways that we can do better, as we strive to offer Jesus our very best.

And Jesus? He offered His very best for you. He offered Himself to be your Savior. He did not send an angel. He did not send a wise and holy man. He did not send a great leader or general. He came down Himself to be born in the flesh, born as a human baby. There was nothing greater or more costly that he could have given, than his own life in your place.

Along the way, nothing was made easy for Jesus. The difficulties started even before He was born. He was jounced along dirt roads as His mother walked or rode the long way to Bethlehem. His mother's labor away from home, away from helpful neighbors and friends, and before they had a decent place to stay. He would have to be spirited away to Egypt, to save him from Herod's raging paranoia. And then would come the temptations of the devil, and the traps of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and then, of course, the flogging and crucifying. Nothing was made easy for God's Son. Yet he carried on in love and all the while offered Himself up for you. He offered His life blood, to break the grip that sin and death had on you. He held nothing back. He gave His very best. He gave His all. He gave enough to answer for your sins and the sins of all mankind.

We are saved, only by His grace, through faith. Our efforts will never be able to pry open the doors of heaven, in part because they have already been opened to us by Jesus. With evil once and for all fully vanquished, there will be no need for security measures in heaven. That's why in John's vision, he writes "its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there."

Jesus gave the very best He could for you. He gave Himself. And it's enough. Enough forgiveness. Enough grace. Enough love. Enough of everything needed for eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen.