It's bittersweet, don't you think, that Christmas day has come and gone so quickly. With Thanksgiving so late in November, we had very little time to prepare for Christmas, and so everything seemed more hectic, with shopping, parties, decorating, the kids off from school, and more. But then, Christmas Eve arrived. And here at Northside at least, through the telling of the Christmas story, the beautiful music, the live nativity, the children, and even the falling snow that night, everything immediately fell into the right place. It became calm and wondrous once again. As it should be. And the reason for this season became clear. Christ our Savior, was born. And now, in the afterglow of Christmas day, we might be able to better celebrate and reflect on Jesus’ birth and what it means for us.

As I was doing my own reflecting, I came across a wonderful sermon by author and preacher, Frederick Buechner, that I thought would be so appropriate for all of us to hear. I used some editorial license in making some changes, but I'm sure he won't mind. The story you'll hear today describes the birth of Christ from the first person viewpoint of three different people: the innkeeper, one of the wise men, and one of the shepherds. So let's begins as Nancy Francis reads our first Scripture.

The Innkeeper – Luke 2:7

“That was a long, long time ago and a long, long way away,” said the Innkeeper. “But the memories of men are also long, and nobody has forgotten anything about my own sad part in it all, unless maybe they have forgotten the truth about it. But you can never blame people for forgetting the truth because it can be, after all, such a blurred or imprecise commodity. In fact, all that distinguishes a truth from a lie may finally be no more than just the flutter of an eyelid or the tone of a voice. So I do not blame posterity for forgetting the subtleties and making me out to be the black villain of the piece – the heartless one who said, “No room! No room!” Yet nothing is entirely black, you know. Not even the human heart.

I speak to you as men and women of the world. Not as idealists, but as realists. Do you know what it’s like to run an inn – to run a business, a family, to run anything in this world for that matter, even your
own life. It is like being lost in a forest of a million trees, and each tree is a thing to be done. Is there fresh linen on all the beds? Did the children put on their coats before they went out? Has the letter been written, the bills paid? Is there money enough left in the bank? Today we have food in our bellies and clothes on our backs, but what can we do to make sure that we will have them still tomorrow? A million trees. A million things. Until finally we have a mind for nothing else, and whatever we see turns into a thing. Take for instance, an animal dead on the side of the road. Just a thing to be passed by, not the mystery of death. The calling of children outside your window – just a distraction, an irrelevance, not life, not the greatest joy of them all. That whispering in the air at night that comes suddenly from nowhere – only the wind, the wind...

Of course I remember very well the evening they arrived. I was working on my accounts and looked up just in time to see the woman coming through the door. She walked in the slow, heavy-footed way that women have in the last months. Her husband stood a little behind her, somewhat desperate, I thought. I cannot remember either of them saying anything, although I suppose some words must have passed. But it was mostly silence. The clumsy silence of the poor. You know what I mean. It was clear enough what they wanted. The stars had come out. I remember the stars perfectly, though I don't know why I should, sitting inside as I was. I had not stood up to greet them, of course. There was mainly just silence. Then it happened much in the way that you have heard. I did not lie about there being no room left – there really was none – though perhaps if there had been a room, I might have lied. As much for their sakes as for the sake of the inn. Their kind would have felt more at home in a stable, that’s all, and I do not mean that unkindly either. God knows.

Later that night, when the baby came, I was not there. I was lost in the forest somewhere, the unenchanted forest of a million trees. Fifteen steps to the cellar, and watch out for your head going down. Firewood to the left. If the fire goes out, the heart freezes. Yes, it's only the wind, the wind. I speak to you as men and women of the world. So when the baby came, I was not around, and I saw none of it. As for what I heard – just at that moment itself of birth when nobody turns into somebody – I do not rightly know what I heard.

But this I do know. All your life long, you wait for your ultimate heart’s desire. We, all of us do – we wait for our destiny, our joy, our passion. And so how am I to say it? When he came, I missed him.
Pray for me brothers and sisters. Pray for the Innkeeper. Pray for me and for us all, for our heart’s desire.”

*The Wise Man – Matthew 2:1-2*

“Beware of beautiful strangers,” said one of the wise men, “and on Friday avoid travel by water. The sun is moving into the house of Venus, so affairs of the heart will prosper. We said this to Herod, or something along those lines. To have told him anything of real value, we would have had to spend weeks of study, months, calculating the conjunction of the planets at the precise moment of his birth and at the births of his parents and their parents back to the fourth generation. But Herod knew nothing of this, and he jumped at the nonsense we threw him like a hungry dog and thanked us for it. A lost man, you see, even though he was a king. Neither really a Jew nor really a Roman, he was at home nowhere. And he believed in nothing, neither Zeus nor the Holy One of Israel. So he was ready to jump at anything, and he swallowed our little jingle whole. But it could hardly have been more obvious that jingles were the least of what he wanted from us.

“Go and find me the child,” the king told us, and as he spoke, his fingers trembled so that his emerald rings rattled together like teeth. “Because I want to come and worship him,” he said, and when he said that, his hands were still as death. Death. I ask you, does a man need the stars to tell him that no king has ever yet bowed down to another king? He took us for children, that sly, lost old fox, and so it was like children that we answered him. “Yes, of course,” we said, and went our way. His hands fluttered to his throat like moths.

Why did we travel so far to be there when it happened? Why was it not enough just to know the secret without having to be there ourselves to behold it? To this, not even the stars had an answer. The stars said simply that he would be born. It was another voice altogether that said to go – a voice as deep within ourselves as the stars are deep within the sky. But why did we go? I could not tell you now, and I could not have told you then. Curiosity, I suppose: to be wise is to be eternally curious, and we were very wise. We wanted to see for ourselves this One before whom even the stars are said to bow down – to see perhaps if it was really true because even the wise have their doubts. And longing. Longing. Why will a man who is dying of thirst crawl miles across sands as hot as fire at simply the possibility of water? But if we longed to receive, we longed also to give. Why will a man labor and struggle all the days of his life so that in the end he has something to give the one he loves?
So finally we got to the place where the star pointed us. It was at night. Very cold. The Innkeeper showed us the way that we did not need to be shown. A harebrained, busy man. The odor of the hay was sweet, and the cattle’s breath came out in little puffs of mist. The man and the woman. Between them the king. We did not stay long. Only a few minutes as the clock goes, but really what we were witnessing was eternity...ten thousand, thousand years.

And I will tell you two terrible things. One, what we saw on the face of the newborn child was not only innocence and peace, but also his death. Any fool could see it. It sat on his head like a crown, this death he would one day die. And two, we saw, as sure as the earth beneath our feet, that to stay with him would be to share that death. That is why we left, giving only our gifts, withholding the rest. And now, brothers and sisters, I will ask you a question, and God knows I ask it also of myself. Is the truth beyond all truths, just this: that to live without him is the real death, that to die with him is the only life?”

_The Shepherd – Luke 2:8-20_

“Night was coming on, and it was cold and the ground was frozen hard,” the shepherd said, "and I was terribly hungry. I had finished all the bread I had in my sack, and my gut still ached for more. Darkness... cold... and hunger. I think these are the three things any person fears the most. Darkness, cold, and hunger. Yet, apparently, this was my fate, my life's work, until the very day that I would die. Living outside in the fields in all kinds of weather, tending other people's sheep, scratching for a meager existence.

No man ever stops dreaming, or hoping. Of better times, another place, a different way of life. But until those things might happen, you really have only two choices. To give up, or to make the best of what you have. That's when I took note of my friends around me, poor, humble shepherds like me, and for some reason I felt compelled and I shouted out loud, "by God, it's good, my brothers". It is good. And they thought I was a terrible fool, but I know they understood what I meant. And we all laughed, and passed around some wine.

Now we weren't drunk from the wine, I promise you, but it wasn't just a few minutes after our camaraderie when the strangest thing happened. I can only say it was, surreal. You know how
sometimes just before a great storm there is no wind, and nothing moves, and the air is empty, and even the silence keeps silent. That's the way it was at that moment. But then, in an instant, everything changed. The wind picked up, first soft from nowhere, then it became alive. The air wasn't just emptiness anymore. And suddenly there was brightness everywhere, dipping and wheeling, like a flock of birds. And what you had just thought to be silent, suddenly stop being silent and turned into the beating of wings, thousands and thousands of them. Only not just wings, but voices, entrancing, exhilarating, with trumpets. The words they spoke I cannot remember for certain, but later I thought they had sounded something like what I yelled out earlier to my friends. "By God, it's good my brothers, it's very good. Go see for yourselves."

Oh, well, if you think we looked like we were out of our minds, you're probably right, of course. I can still see us. Jacob, the oldest, always complaining about his aches and pain and sore feet. Enoch, the youngest, who could out swear a Roman soldier. Samuel, the eternal pessimist. And me. We all tore off across the frozen field just like drunks, at a fair. We went splashing through a sea of wings and light and the silvery wool of the sheep. Was it day, was it night? What was happening? Did our feet even touch the ground?

‘Shh, shh, you'll wake my guests," said the innkeeper we met coming in the other direction with his arms full of wood. ‘My fire has gone out,’ he muttered as we passed. And when we got to the stable out back, one of three strange foreigners held up a finger to his lips to quiet us. "We were just leaving," he whispered. But I knew he understood the truth as to why we had come, and it wasn't just curiosity. Hush. There he is. Such humble surroundings. Can you see him?

By Almighty God brothers, it is good, and it's going to get much, much better."