

Unusual Visitors at the Manger

Christmas Eve

Ezekiel 37:27



²⁷My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Christmas is kind of like a journey home. It's true all over the world. Airports, trains, and highways are overflowing with people, all wanting to go home. Even the Christmas Eve church service is a kind of homecoming: we want to take a deep breath, listen to the old Christmas carols, and awaken memories of beautiful thoughts of home. The first Christmas story also begins with a kind of homecoming. We see Joseph setting out to travel to Bethlehem, the city of his

forefathers. The many Persians among us are also on a journey home. For when the child Jesus was born, Persians were among the first to greet him. The Magi from the East came from the territory of the Persian Empire. Today's Persians join hands with the wise Persians of yesteryear and celebrate Christmas together. The children portrayed this journey home through the very different characters in the nativity play this year. We saw Joseph and Mary, the shepherds, and then the Magi. They all wanted to come home.

Dear guests, dear children and families, now we've all come together: the shepherds, the wise men, Mary and Joseph, and we! But have you noticed something? Something or someone is still missing. These were the ones who didn't have to travel to the manger, but were already there. Yes, the animals are missing. Do you know which ones I mean? Right, you can see them in so many pictures and paintings. An ox and a donkey. But these animals aren't mentioned in the Christmas story. Why are the ox and the donkey almost never missing from depictions of the birth of Jesus, even though they aren't directly mentioned in the Bible? The answer is interesting. Long before Jesus was born, many hundreds of years before, God had said through the prophet Isaiah: (Isaiah 1:3) "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." When artists paint the ox and the donkey, they want to express that the animals know where they belong, even if the people do not. The animals are at the manger, and at the same time, they pose a question to us: "Do you know where you belong?" Of all the people who went to Bethlehem for Christmas, we must now talk about the most important person who went to Bethlehem: God himself. God himself did not shy away from the long journey, finding his bed in a manger. God had to find his bed in the manger because people had no idea who he was. All of this is not just some random story to warm our hearts but shows us that God knows us. Yes, he not only knows us, but he also loves us. And he desires nothing more than to make his home among us. God wants to be at home with us. And yet, it seems that the ox and the donkey have a better understanding of these things than people do. Ezekiel the prophet already foretold this when he said that God himself would make his dwelling among us." So it's not just about Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, and the many others. It's not about us having set out on our journey, but about God having set out on his journey to us. When

God sets out on his journey to us, it also means, first and foremost, that we are not yet with him. Yes, we have distanced ourselves from God, and therefore we have no understanding of him. And because God is so far away, there are so many things in the world that cause us fear and worry, that oppress us and make us sick. Ultimately, our distance from God even brings death. Sometimes we are even sad about ourselves and our lives. But God still comes. The child in the manger is God, who says to us: "I love you; I want to be near you. I want to be with you. And you may come to the manger, where the child is, with all your worries, joys, and fears. For there, I am at home with you." The wise men brought gifts to the child when they arrived. In reality, the child himself is the greatest and most important gift one can receive. The writer Max Lucado has illustrated all of this in a beautiful story. He explains it like this: When it was all over. When the shepherds and everyone else had gone home, and when Mary and Joseph were already fast asleep, a very, very old woman approached. The woman was so old that she was covered from head to toe in wrinkles and festering sores. She was completely hunched over and could hardly walk. Hesitantly, she came to the manger and finally took something out of her bag. What she took out was an unusual and totally crazy gift. She didn't bring gold, frankincense or myrrh, not even a nice warm sheepskin, like the shepherds might have brought. She brought an apple with a bite taken out. She took it and gave it to the child in the manger. Then a miracle happened. Suddenly, it was as if the old woman were completely new again. She was no longer covered in wrinkles and wounds. She stood up and walked dancing into the darkness. This story isn't in the Bible. Max Lucado invented it. But it shows so clearly how we come to the child, and what it means to go to him. The woman Max Lucado describes is meant to symbolize Eve. The story shows how we come with our sins from the past and place them in the manger, and then everything becomes new. We have arrived. We have left everything that burdens us there. All our mistakes, imperfections, sickness and our fears are placed in the manger. Now we are completely with God, and he is completely with us. And from here, we walk dancing into the rest of our lives and into all eternity.

My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
Amen.