

December 18, 2022
Advent 4-A
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18, Romans 1:1-7, Matt 1:18-25

Well, the snow storm really helped the Christmas spirit! One of the neat things about being in the northern part of North America at this time of year is that it evokes a contemplative spirit. I love being snowed in. When it has snowed so hard that even cars and trucks don't move, the world is hushed. There is a silence that can be so deep that it is deafening. One of my favorite views in New England in the deep mid-winter is the very faint pink glow at sunset cast across the countryside....a countryside that is dotted with old farmhouses and steeples, and the bare-gray bark of trees gone to sleep for the winter.

Yesterday I got out some Christmas boxes and found those things I saved from mom and dad's decorations and ornaments, and then I came across this story I wrote after a big family gathering 30 years ago – it is a bit *Prairie Home Companions*, but, it is also about a spiritual revelation that I had. Now don't let this get you confused about which season of the year we're in, but on the fourth Sunday of Advent I'm going to tell you story about how I had an Epiphany at Christmas! And then I'll end with a little meditation on Joseph.

I was home for a big family Christmas. We even had cousins who came from Ohio – about 30 people in all. My parents lived in a big old 1790s farmhouse in Fitzwilliam – down near Keene. Though it had 6 bedrooms, and lots of the grandkids were spread around the 2 rooms on the third floor, it definitely couldn't hold 30, so we also rented the whole 3rd floor of the old Fitzwilliam Inn just down the road from their home and on the town common. Now the whole third floor of the inn was only 6 rooms, but that took care of us.....although we had to share bathrooms.

And such was our relationship with the innkeeper, that he allowed dad to put a coffee pot out in the hall for us for the morning, with muffins and donuts. The village is nestled around the common and probably has just a couple hundred people in the village. I was one who took a room at the inn, which was actually great to be able to get away from the commotion at the house!

On Christmas Eve we all gathered at the house for an early dinner, then walked down to the church on the common. Going to church at Christmas in Fitzwilliam is a bit like Brigadoon – the same people show up on Christmas Eve with many people home for the holidays, many I hadn't seen since the year before. Nothing much seems to change. The service, the hymns, the Christmas decorations are all about the same. Borrowing from a southwestern practice, the local historical society places luminaries (candles in weighted paper bags) on the granite fence posts surrounding the common. All of the houses around the common have single white lights in all the windows. After the service ends with a candlelight version of Silent Night, there is a peculiar little tradition in Fitzwilliam for those who walk to church-- you try to keep your candle lit as you walk home. It is quite magical to see heavily bundled folks, their frosty breath being illuminated by the glowing candles in their hands, walking to all corners of the village.

That night I couldn't sleep well. Partly from the excitement of the day and the family being all together, partly from the exhaustion of making sure everything was ready for Christmas morning, and maybe partly from the clanging of the old radiator in my room as it knocked and hissed in its effort to keep the room warm. (Some of you will remember!). I remember sitting by my bedroom window with my view to the large steeple of the town hall, the common, the luminaries, and a big full moon making its arc in the sky and casting its silvery light over a wintry countryside...and it was here, in the wee hours of the morning that I remember feeling the fullness, the watching and waiting, the stillness that somehow calmed me and made me feel the timeless greatness of God.

I remember being aware of the anticipation of what was to come the next day – the joy and exhaustion of it all, yet it was as if time had stopped, at least for a little while, and in the solitude of the night, a clarity or deeper consciousness of the connection of all life was a tangible and very peaceful presence.....and a knowing that we have been left in charge! Yes, God has given all of this into our care.

So, let's talk about Joseph and having things left in our care. How many of you when you were younger were ever left to babysit for younger siblings, or maybe did babysitting as a job as a teen? Do you remember the confidence you felt as the parents left the instructions and you were sure you could handle it. Then as the night wore on you were out of stories and games and the kids became more cranky! And what if the parents never came back – maybe they were killed in a car crash or something. What would you do then as the eldest sibling or babysitter?

Let's take a look at one of God's babysitters as described to us in the Gospel this morning. I want you to think about Joseph as a model of a faithful babysitter, as it were. Joseph doesn't really last long in the story of Jesus, but this morning's reading is where he comes shining through. And, as the writer makes sure to point out, he is Joseph, 'son of David' – he is of that lineage!

Think on this young man who finds his wife pregnant and doesn't know quite what to do. Scripture calls him a righteous man – this is not some sort of 'nice guy' attribution; he was very faithful in following Yahweh. He was 'betrothed' to Mary, which in Jewish culture then was not just an 'engagement', for the woman was considered the man's wife, but they just weren't considered married until he had taken her into his home. The man would have to give her a written paper in front of two witnesses, much like the old Biblical divorce procedure, in order to end the betrothal. Joseph, as we hear, was intent on doing this quietly, to try to avoid scandal.

But an angel comes to Joseph in his dreams and counsels another way, and announces to him that this child was a gift from God, and even

what to name him, Jesus/Joshua, which means 'God saves us'. So now we have 2 names with meaning from our readings: Emmanuel, God with us, and Jesus, God saves us.

Think on this man Joseph who is so faithful that angels visit him in dreams..... a young man who labors with wood, bringing life to things from bare wood through countless hours of sawing, sanding, and shaping. What did the lessons of his wood working give him that gave him insight into the ability to work miracles from mere wood. Did his work teach him to have confidence in the angelic pronouncement? Maybe he thought, "If God can use my hands to make things of beauty, God can take me and this horrible situation and change it into beauty."

I hope that Joseph's yes, as well as Mary's yes to God, provide us an example of how we can have faith in the midst of horrible circumstances and trust that God, through us and 'with us' can make beautiful things out of the raw wood that so often face us in life. And that we must step up to protect the 'young woman and child' – those who are so vulnerable, but hold so much promise for life.....even if our story, like Joseph, may seem inconsequential too.

Our country is raw, the little ones are frightened and angry, some are wishing for the second coming of Christ just so it will all be over! But he has left us in charge. What are we to do? Will the light that is coming into the world enlighten us all. Folks, we are the babysitters and we have the flashlight! And the intent of Advent is that we 'wake up' to this idea of God with us; and with Mary and Joseph, hold fast to the notion that we too, care for the lost and frightened, and bring the light of Christ into the world!

We now take a moment to ponder these readings and the faithfulness of Joseph, and contemplate how, just like my experience many Christmases ago, we wake up to how we too are God's carpenters, and God has given us the spiritual wood-working tools to craft lovely things out of the raw wood of our lives, and to care for the needy and vulnerable of this world.