

Christmas, Year A
December 24, 2022
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Isaiah 9: 2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2: 11-14

Luke 2: 1-20

“On them the light has shined” – and so begins this passage from Isaiah and the mystery and truth of the incarnation of God in Jesus. And tonight is all about the story, and knowing the story. It has become something of a tradition for me to try to retell the story to bring it to life, which I will do in a few moments. I figure that no one really wants to hear a deep theological sermon on Christmas Eve, well except for some clergy colleagues, so I just tell the story in a new way. But be prepared, I’ll hit you with some heavy theology at the end just so you think you got your money’s worth!

The story of Christ’s birth is one that is central to our faith and culture. But the power of story lives in our families too, and intersects with faith and culture stories – our own traditions around Christmas are a good example.

For many years my memories are of Christmas in Fitzwilliam, NH, with my family, with all the old ornaments and decorations (an angel for the tree that began to look a little like she stumbled out of a bar, but we loved her still), traditional foods, little rituals with cooking, going off to church on Christmas Eve, the singing of ‘Silent Night’ with the lighting of the candles, and then, in the village of Fitzwilliam, many people who walk to church try to walk their little candle home; so if you are watching from a distance, you see little candlelight emerge from the church and spread

throughout the village; which is a nice little incarnational vision of taking the light of Christ into the world.

Though those are but memories now, the story continues. For us who believe, the light never goes out, and be it village church, new church, in the home or in the market, the wonder of 'God with us', the meaning of 'Emmanuel', is made known to us tonight.

So here's my practice of a little incarnational theology tonight by retelling the Christmas story to try to make it fresh. There is even an opportunity for audience participation for the young and young at heart – especially if you like to make animal noises. So here goes.....This was inspired by an early morning trip to our barn in Boscawen some years ago just before the winter solstice to feed and water the chickens – Doug and I get up at 5am, so it was still dark. It had been cold and snowy. I stepped outside into a night sky that shone with the stars that the shepherds and angels must have seen too. I carried a kerosene lamp because the barn wasn't wired for electricity then. The snow was dry and crunched, almost squeaked under foot. I went to our old outdoor well that is so deep it doesn't freeze in the winter and began to pump the handle to bring up water. There was the sound of the big old metal arm working as I pumped up and down, and then the splashing as the water hit the bucket.

I walked to the barn and hung up the lantern. Shadows were cast around the barn by the light. The chickens began to cluck. The chickens were glad to have the ice broken from their watering trough and fresh water put in....and the sound of grain and cracked corn hitting their grain trough. One chicken emerged from the stacked wooden cubby-hole nests from an early morning delivery of an egg. My breath steamed the air in the half light of the lantern.

The barn was built maybe in the 1820s or 30's and it has 3 stories – the top 2 for hay, with 2 foot wide floor boards that are 2 -3 inches thick, and old barn board throughout. There are stalls for cattle or sheep with a manger, and 2 stalls for probably oxen or work horses – then taken up by various machinery, and of course our little indoor chicken coop with an

assortment of chicken varieties: NH Reds, Black Astralorps, and Barred Rocks. And there are 2 great sliding doors for 2 different entrances. and a space for a large wagon, occupied by our old John Deere tractor. I thought of that stable in Bethlehem many nights before and the animals that might have been gathered around.

All was calm, all was bright.....

There were 3 shepherd boys up in the hills of Bethlehem that night. They were the teenagers of a young couple, Miriam and Ezra. Miriam loved the names of the great patriarchs of their faith, especially names that begin with 'J', so she named her boys Joshua, Jacob, and Jeremiah. They had been sent to watch over the flock that night as usual. They had bedded down the sheep in the sheepfold and were sitting around the fire. They had their dog, 'Moses', with them who always seemed to sense danger before they did – great for fending off predators. The boys were huddled around the fire on a damp night. Their woolen cloaks had that wet wool smell (like woolen mittens I remember from childhood). Their fronts were nice and toasty, but their backs felt the creep of cold up their spine. They'd have to turn occasionally like meat on a spit...but at least it was warm. They talked of all the recent events and especially their hatred for the Roman occupation. They hoped the Messiah would come soon and they were well aware that, as the prophecies predicted, he would arise from their hometown, Bethlehem.

Then they fell asleep. They dreamed of home, of warmth and good food, and they dreamed about the longed-for messiah that would free them from Rome. There was a crackling of the wood in the fire and then one woke, and then the other two. There was a fine mist in the air, and stars like you wouldn't believe. But a funny starlight shone through the mist, almost as if shining on Bethlehem. One by one they each told the others of a similar dream...of messengers, or were they angels!, announcing the coming of the messiah, of something grand happening in Bethlehem, of distant glorious singing, and then they heard the sounds from town and could see lights coming from homes. Jacob said to older brother, Joshua,

‘Why don’t we head down to town for a while and get something to eat and maybe sneak a little wine’, but Joshua, being older and more responsible, said, “Why Jacob, I’m surprised at you, going to Bethlehem for a little drink would just be ‘Recklis!’ [pun intended – the name of a restaurant/bar in Bethlehem, NH!]. But Jeremiah piped up and said, “Please, Joshua, just for a little while”. Joshua relented, and Jeremiah said, “Can I bring my drum?”. Joshua said, “Oh, you and your drum – parumpapumpum, parampapumpum!”. So they packed up, left Moses in charge, and headed to town.

Down in town a young couple was navigating through the streets after a long journey and it was late. This was hometown for Joseph, but things had changed so he was a little lost. Mary asked him to stop and ask for directions, but of course, he wouldn’t. He remembered an old inn , but couldn’t remember where it was exactly. Mary eventually prevailed with Joseph and they stopped and asked directions from a man in the main square. He said, “Ah yes, the old inn is still open and you can easily see it from most places in Bethlehem because it’s on a little rise, so most people just point and say ‘over there’, so much so that most people just call it the ‘There Inn’ [again, a little pun on the Thayer Inn on Main St., Littleton].

They went to the inn. They knock, the innkeeper opens.....warm light streams out the door, good smells of baked bread and fresh stew, laughter and comfort....but there’s no room, but the innkeeper offered a little stable out back. They would have to share with the animals, but Joseph jumped at the chance. The innkeeper saw Mary was pregnant and they wished they could do more. He told them where the well was and promised he would bring them some stew in a bit.

He takes them to the barn.....there are animals....the smell of hay is in the air. Joseph is just glad to be out of the cold night air, even in a barn there is some sense of protection....and once they’re settled in the hay there will be warmth. They have a little oil lamp for light. Joseph goes out to the well to draw water....Mary hears his footsteps, the bucket clunking along

the sides of the well as it is lowered, some splashes of water. She's thirsty and looking forward to a drink.

He returns. She has carved out a space with some hay for them for the night. Nearby is a little manger of hay for the sheep, just off the floor enough to keep it clean and low enough for them to reach....might come in useful a little later. It was quite the scene-- shadows were cast by a simple oil light, cows faces, a horses soft nose and puffs of steam coming out nostrils. The sound of animals chomping and shifting around. [audience participation with sounds, pause after each animals name for sounds] A cow's moo. A sheep's bleat. A horse's soft nay. A pig's grunt. A chicken's stifled clucking. A camel's groan?!

In the barn things were changing quickly. Mary was in labor. The silent barn was filled with some loud cries from Mary, some whimpering and groaning. The Innkeepers wife came out to help. Mary was trying to remember everything the midwife told her. And very soon the baby came. Joseph was actually useful! He knew the religious laws forbid him from touching Mary in childbirth, but there was no one else.....he figured God would understand. Fortunately, they had some extra clean cloth to wrap the baby – they had come prepared.

Then people started to show up.....some because they heard the young woman in labor and wanted to make sure she was ok. Folks came from the inn when they heard people arriving. There were strangers from the East that were following a star that suddenly appeared – they said they believed it foretold a special birth. The shepherd boys came to see too. Somehow everyone knew something special was going on. There was just something about this family.....and that baby, what was it.....was there really a glow around him or was it just some steam rising.

Some of them were remembering the prophecy about the messiah coming from the house and lineage of David, and from Bethlehem. Well, if he was going to be the Messiah, he'll have to grow up and had much to learn about armies and weapons if he was going to help liberate Palestine from the Romans. But everyone went away that night feeling that

something had happened that changed them. Some said it was just the women getting weepy over a new baby, others thought maybe it was indigestion from too much mutton stew....but wasn't it odd how all the animals were so still and quiet, and couldn't take their eyes off the baby?

Well, I hoped that make the story live again for you. Through Advent we have tried to focus on slowing down and contemplating; walking with Mary – pregnant with God! And tonight we are in the thick of it – and so counter-cultural to what Christmas has become for so many.

So, are you ready for the heavy theology? Stay with me now, some of this theological language can get a little thick and obtuse! Tonight the Christmas story, the music, the vestments, the flowers, the creche – all this stuff---is not the point, it is only a doorway to all that Jesus came to teach us about being more fully alive. So let's open the door. Now, here is the deep theological truth behind the door and about tonight, are you ready?: God loves you!, and is with you even now. As in that word – Emmanuel, 'God with us'! And what's even more scary and astonishing is that God loves the person next to you in the same way! I know, you're probably saying that's what I'm supposed to say. But it's more than some trite phrase...the whole story is one of love so great that Jesus came for us, to show us the way to a deeper way of being human and alive. And it is not just for us, but that we might dwell in love and give it away. In fact, giving it away is indeed what makes us even more alive!

In recent years I've begun to say to people, "I don't care if you say you believe in God!, show me how you follow." And I say 'follow' with deep intent. I'm not asking about what good works you do, though that is always good, I'm asking a deeper question – How do you follow the way of Jesus so that you are living into that life that makes you fully alive and in love with God and neighbor?

And that life is a reality. Saints and mystics and people of great prayer, and some people who have had near death experiences know it is real. A long time ago I stopped being a Christian so I can go to heaven---

though I believe in heaven, I don't really care about heaven as some place after death! I think we'll all be surprised when we get there! I am a Christian because it makes me more fully alive and helps me to experience heaven right now – that other, richer dimension is all around us! As Jesus was so fond of saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand!" .

And, we have Today. We may not have tomorrow, we may never see another Christmas this side of heaven, but we have today, so let each of us go forth rejoicing into this dark cold night, knowing that even as the days are now getting longer and the sun is rising higher, so too Christ, the light of the world, is rising in our hearts and lives....and let us make our faith more than believing in something intellectually, but lived out by following in daily practice the one who taught us the way.