

Eve of the Nativity - 12/24/09
St. David's

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for ALL the people. Amen."

We are here. It is the night of all nights. It is the night when the light both metaphorically and literally breaks through the darkness of the world and our own lives. It is the night that speaks to us in so many ways. Every song, every word results in a flood of emotions for each of us, poignantly tying us to Christmases past, raising in us both pain and pleasure, joy and conflict.

It is the night so saturated with meaning that it makes my job virtually impossible. I know that nearly everything I say is going to take you on an emotional roller coaster through the past. But somehow, I am supposed to get you to a place where you can hear how this story we all know so well can change you now and in the future.

In an attempt to do just that, let us begin not with the Christmas story itself, but our own story, in the here and now. As many of you know, over the last few years the parishioners of this parish have turned St. David's into the central location for social services in the city of Page. You have helped thousands of people. Some of them you have literally helped survive, some you have helped to get back on their feet and some you have given back their dignity and respect. In many ways, we are out-resourcing the full time agencies in town who do this for a living, and you are all doing it as volunteers. It is an astounding accomplishment, one that I believe responds directly to the Christmas message.

With that volume of people coming to us for assistance, it is a rare day when we

do not get a client who is traveling from point A to point B and is looking for help in getting there. Sometimes their trips have been fraught with problems, but often what we discover is that even if everything had gone perfect for them, they would not have had enough money to reach their final destination. In such instances, it is difficult to not think, "Well, why in the world did you ever leave in the first place?" How could someone be so dumb as to travel without the resources to get where they wanted to go? In such a situation, it is sometimes difficult to feel compassion, thinking that what the people really need is some common sense.

The story you just heard, the one that all of us know so intimately, the one we have heard and seen thousands of times in narratives, plays, paintings, cards, decorations, living scenes and every other imaginable art form and not so art like form, the story we know so well we don't even hear it anymore, spoke to me this week, as if I had never heard it before. It was another long day in the office and I had been interrupted dozens of times, trying to write these words. Then there was another couple at the door, looking for assistance to get to their destination. I asked them why they had left when they knew darn well they did not have enough money to get there. So they told me. "We didn't know what else to do. We heard this place had a job, so we left and we prayed."

In the midst of my cynicism, it all hit me at once. Tonight's story and the story of the people standing in front of me were the same. I started weeping on the spot. Mary and Joseph were standing in front of me in the Aiken Center.

For those of us who have means, traveling without money is pure folly. But for

people with nothing, for people who have no resources from which to draw, it sometimes is the only hope, the only way to avoid destitution or death. That is exactly what is happening in the Christmas story we all think we know so well. Whether or not the census idea that Luke suggests as the reason Mary and Joseph must travel is historically accurate or not, the point is, Mary and Joseph must travel at a very inopportune time. Like all those people who come to our door, they head out on a wing and a prayer. They are dirt poor, so of course there is no room at the inn, because they have no money.

The implications of this epiphany are so profound for all of us. Seeing the look in the eyes of those who come to us for assistance can help us hear the Christmas story again. Now we can understand just how Mary and Joseph must have felt. When someone's life is constantly on the wrong side of poverty, there is always fear and desperation. For those of us who do have means, the real Christmas story reminds us that Mary and Joseph are still here with us. Rather than chastise someone for not having any common sense, we can now understand their plight. Then we have the unbelievable honor of taking away some of their fear, of bringing them to a place where the baby can be born in love and safety. Whether you are part of this congregation or not, all of us have Mary and Joseph come into our lives all the time. It is up to us to take away their fear.

For those of you who are presently living without those resources, the story of Christmas has even more to say to you. The whole premise of Christmas is radical enough, this impossible notion that God would decide to become one of us, that God

would stop just being a cosmic force out there, but also become a flesh and bone human being. It is inconceivable on so many levels. But when we realize that this God of ours is also born into abject poverty to desperate parents who must lay him in some feeding trough in a barn in a town 1400 miles from the capital city of Rome, what could this possibly mean? Tonight I would suggest to you that what it means is that God is on your side, that our God is with you in a real and intimate way in the midst of your fears and your despair. Perhaps even more importantly, the event that we celebrate tonight must convince us that our God wants this all to change, our God never wants another person to live in poverty and fear ever again. The Christmas story is the first symbol we have in our sacred text of the mission Jesus will eventually take on, to challenge all those in authority who create systems that keep money and honor in the hands of a few while the rest suffer, the mission to create a world where power is returned to the people, the people who have no power, like Mary and Joseph and Jesus himself. Tonight we must be full of joy, because with the birth of a baby born in poverty, there is now hope of peace and justice for all of us.

This is not to say that tonight fixes everything. The presence of God with us gives us hope and joy that the destructive patterns of the world will change. But as the other Christmas story makes clear, the one in the Gospel of Matthew, fearful world leaders like Herod are still around, plotting to kill Jesus and all of our babies. Resistance to the realm of God continues to be all around us. There are still plenty of people who continue to use fear to attempt to control us and move us away from the baby's call for peace and justice for all. It has been especially present with us this year as many of you

have faced the fear or the reality of losing your jobs, losing your security. We have fear that the entire economy will collapse beneath us. We fear terrorists. We fear loss of control. We fear death. All of these are realistic concerns of course, but they all separate us from Christmas. They all allow the power brokers to stay in control of us. Our fears continue to perpetuate the system that Jesus came to replace. That is why the first words that are spoken after Jesus's birth are these; "Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for ALL the people."

When we truly believe, when we accept the radical message of the real Christmas story, when we understand that God is with each and every one of us tonight and for the rest of our lives, the fear will dissipate. Because when we know God is with us, nothing can have a hold on us. And without fear, we can no longer be manipulated by those who think they have power over us. We cannot be held hostage anymore. If we lose our job and everything we have, where will we end up? In the same place Jesus was on this very night, 2000 years ago.

It is our present anxiety and fear that separates us from having the opportunity to experience the real Christmas in our lives. But if we can heed the call of that angel tonight, the process that Jesus started will continue. We will break down the system that allows the status quo to continue. And when we remain unafraid, we will be able to experience Emmanuel, God with us, at those times in our lives when we need him most. No longer will we be intimidated. Jesus is here. Christmas is real. Let us all carry that light of Christmas into the darkness that continues to exist, never being afraid of it ever again. Amen.