

## CHRISTMAS EVE

*While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.* Luke 2:6

I imagine that stable was cold and dark. Palestine in the dead of winter. An occupation government making onerous demands at the worst possible time. A desperate, dislocated little family, their only sanctuary an outbuilding for the animals, a crude shelter. No sense of what the future might hold for them. Fear, uncertainty, loneliness... bleak midwinter, all right. That's what the story tells us.

And here in the United State, and here in Jamaica Plain, we are in our own bleak mid-winter. Storms have savaged New England, leaving many residents without power for days and days on end. A disastrous, discredited government is trying on its way out to enact as many cruel and damaging policies as possible. An untried new administration is facing the worst economic calamity since the Great Depression. Fear and uncertainty are taking an unprecedented toll on the national psyche and in personal lives.

While the small and personal family drama unfolds in that stable, something else follows out beyond, in the wider region where shepherds live in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks. An angel appears to them and says *Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people!*' The world within the stable may seem to its principals, Mary and Joseph, huddled close and alone with their new baby, to be fraught with anxiety and confusion. But into the wider world come tidings of peace from a divine messenger.

They say that in times of trouble, churches and synagogues – and mosques too, I dare say – fill up with people. After 9/11 attendance soared at houses of prayer – for a while. And indeed, our parish here at St. John's has been unusually full this holiday season: new folks arriving and then returning. Are they here – are you here? – because of the economic meltdown, layoffs, foreclosures, plummeting investment and retirement accounts? I don't know, mostly.

But while in the wider world outside, all those harsh realities, fears, and uncertainties pertain, inside these walls the spirit is energetic, joyous, and hopeful. Sure, people come to me with their private pain, sorrow, and anxiety. But the congregation, the collective, does not seem infected with gloom. We do not come to hunker down. People gather here to find comfort and consolation, but also to offer solace and support to one

another, to extend and to accept the deep hospitality of the heart, to give and to receive *tidings of comfort and joy*.

So, you might say that we provide a contrast with that ancient story. There, the little family huddles in poverty, in substandard housing, alone with some farm animals, while outside angels sing good news of peace and goodwill toward all, toward all. Here, the outside world may seem threatening and distressingly precarious, while within these walls we share that same good news of peace and goodwill with one another.

But that's not the whole picture, not a balanced contrast. Back in Bethlehem, in that story, there's a character hovering offstage. He, or she, always appears in our Christmas pageant at St. John's, sometimes as a gracious host, sometimes as a reluctant, put-upon, Bethlehemite. That's the innkeeper. Doesn't appear in the bible texts themselves, but in our re-telling of the nativity story we often include that anonymous someone who says *yes*, who gives shelter and sanctuary to the weary, anxious strangers from Nazareth. The innkeeper looks beyond self-interest and self-preservation, and extends hospitality to Mary and Joseph.

And in that innkeeper's humble stable is born a baby whose life and teaching will change the course of human history : *a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord*. We don't know that innkeeper's name. But we imagine and reimagine that person, and celebrate the innkeeper as an emblem of all who reach out and find room, somewhere, for those in need.

And here at St John's, we are not all about ourselves, either. Our gift of hospitality is not confined within these walls. In these difficult and uncertain times, we have not turned our hearts inward. We realize that however anxious and needy we may feel at times, many others in our neighborhood and city are in far worse straits. The leadership of the parish has just recently agreed to explore a new program : Angel Foods Ministry. You will have received in your bulletin a sheet describing this national food relief program, and I hope you will read it and consider joining our effort in some way. We can use everyone's help as we extend our gift of hospitality as widely as possible.

My dear ones, it is Christmas Eve, a Holy Night, a very holy night. We are all gathered tonight, friends and strangers together, to remember and celebrate the birth of the Christ child, to pray and sing about the light that comes into the darkness. Some of you I see and work with daily in our lives together at St. John's. Some of you I see a couple of times a year at the high holidays. Some of you I may never see again. But you are all equally and deeply welcome here tonight.

Because the good news of peace and goodwill, the Gospel of God's saving love, is not confined within these walls. That good news begins, we are told in the ancient and beloved story, begins in a dark cold stable in a small Palestinian town. But immediately the message is proclaimed from the heavens, and spread out into the fields and beyond, to distant kingdoms. The good news: *Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.* The Good News: *On earth peace. On earth peace.* Peace in our hearts. Peace in the world. *Do not be afraid, dear friends, Do not be afraid. Alleluia! Amen.*