

CHRISTMAS EVE

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 1: 6

Out. We come out on Christmas Eve. We come out of the warmth of our houses; we abandon, temporarily, all our last minute preparations for Christmas morning, Christmas dinner. We come out into the cold and dark to hear once again the familiar, beloved story of the birth of Jesus.

We had our splendid Christmas pageant here last Sunday, and some of you attended, despite the storm going on around us then.

A Mexican Christmas tradition, *las posadas* translates as "the inns" or "the lodgings" and symbolizes the Biblical journey of Mary and Joseph as they searched for shelter in Bethlehem before the birth of Jesus. Our children, some costumed as the nativity story characters, and many of the rest of us processed around the sanctuary, singing sometimes as the *outsiders*, Mary and Joseph, and sometimes as the *insiders*, innkeepers, first refusing entry to the holy family, and finally admitting them.

We were asked to ponder some questions: when we might have been *outsiders* ourselves, and how it feels to be an outsider? Then, when have we been *insiders*, how did that feel, and what would make us change our minds from refusing to let others in to, finally, offering hospitality to those who needed it.

I confess that I found it impossible to reflect on these questions while I was marching and singing. Too much multitasking for me! But I have been pondering them since, pondering them as I wonder what calls us, each year, *out* of our homes on Christmas Even and *in* to the precious story of the birth of Jesus.

Most of us, I suspect, don't come thinking we're going to hear an account of literal history. It's not like going to a re-enactment of the battle on Lexington Green, for example. Most of us, I believe, don't think what we're hearing is entirely factual. Angels? A moving star? All that?

No, I think we come to hear the story of salvation history, an account of God's entry into our world in some new and astonishing way, an entry this beloved story ushers in, symbolically.

I remind us often, in my preaching, that biblical thinkers and writers had different ideas of history, and perhaps of truth, from what we do today. Factual accuracy was not what they were aiming for. No, biblical story tellers were reaching to express a reality

that lies deeper than verifiable facts, deeper than historical events per se. They were reaching for truth, for the deep meaning at the heart of human existence, the deep meaning at the heart of God.

And we come out at Christmas to hear rehearsed, once again, some of that truth. We come to be reminded that we have all been, at some point, *outsiders* like Mary and Joseph, urgently needing sanctuary, welcome, and protection from forces that threaten to overwhelm us. Those forces may be physical, they may be economic, they may be emotional, psychological, or spiritual. But the truth is, we've all been there – importuning others for help and for solace.

And at other times we've all been *insiders*: fortunate, safe, secure, belonging. And if we are honest in our retrospective, we must admit that at points, like the recalcitrant Bethlehem innkeepers, we've all been reluctant, or absolutely opposed, to allowing others admission to our place of privilege. And I hope we can all remember, as well, times when we've changed our minds, and welcomed in those to whom we've been refusing hospitality.

The Christmas story is a story of how humankind nearly refused God entry into our world. How we nearly rebuffed God's bold, unprecedented new approach to us. How we almost turned away from God's embrace.

We venture out on Christmas Eve to be reminded, to be reassured, that we escaped that grievous error. We come to hear again of the great *yes* that the world said, two thousand years ago, to God.

And we come out tonight to say that great *yes* ourselves, to welcome once again the newborn Savior into our hearts. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen