

Christmas Eve and Day
Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7, Psalm 96, Luke 2:1-20
December 24 & 25, 2015
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Tonight we should be most grateful for St. Luke's gospel. Without Luke we wouldn't know Jesus was born in an enclosure for animals because the inn was full. We wouldn't know that Jesus' first bed was a feed trough. We wouldn't know that brave shepherds were scared to death when out of a pitch black night sky a radiant angel appeared and then a multitude of the heavenly host shone brighter than the sun at midday. Afterwards, they will leave their flocks and dash to see for themselves what the angel told them. These out-of-door dwellers become both the first witnesses and the first evangelists at a time when respectable people prayed every night that their daughters wouldn't marry one.

Without Luke's gospel, we just might not have Christmas at all. We certainly wouldn't have enough material from the other three gospels alone for a Christmas pageant. And think of all the Christmas carols that never would have been written without Luke's cherished narrative?

Tonight we are indebted to Luke for bringing the story of Jesus' birth to the printed page and, therefore, to our imaginations and to our yearly, joyous celebrations.

What would be on the front of our Christmas cards if Mary and Joseph had given birth to Jesus in their house like everyone else as Matthew tells us? Have you ever noticed how Mary and Joseph always appear to have on their very best, freshly pressed and laundered clothes? This is, of course, after they have been on the road for several days, and Mary has undoubtedly spent numerous hours on the barnyard floor bearing her firstborn, the Son of the Most High God.

I finally found a card that has a very different and perhaps more accurate image of Mary and Joseph shortly after the miraculous birth. It is copy of an oil painting by an American artist named Gari Melchers. It's called *The Nativity* and was painted in 1891. Joseph is slumped down on a low bench looking pretty tired yet still awake and staring down at a sleeping but glowing baby in a manger. Mary is stretched out on the ground with her head against Joseph's leg. She is obviously spent and passed out from total exhaustion. Her hair looks a bit matted rather than flowing as if she had just spent hours at the hair dresser's.

Luke wants us to know that Jesus, the Lord and Savior of the world, didn't arrive with a silver spoon in his mouth. His parents were poor, working class people, who struggled every day to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads. Jesus will experience life from the very

bottom of the economic rung and, therefore, become the champion of the most common and least desirable people

Christmas is essentially God's decision not only to visit the creation in person, but to become part of it, even one with it, one with us. That's what Emmanuel means. Our hope, which transcends whatever may happen to us or our world, is that God knows about it all firsthand and will see us through the toughest of times. After all, Jesus lived through the toughest of times in his own life.

I was reminded recently that our word "religion" derives from a Latin word meaning "re-ligament" or "re-bind." Religion is intended to reconnect that which has become disconnected, to heal that which is divided, to make one again that which has become two. Christmas is the event that establishes the humanization of God. In Jesus, divinity and humanity are rejoined. In Jesus, God became like us so we could become like God, as an early church father said.

Luke puts this incomprehensible yet remarkable truth into a story we can visualize and relish year after year after year. On our part, we are to do everything possible with the help of the Holy Spirit and the church to become holy in every aspect of our lives.

Getting back to the story – After Mary has been jolted back to wakefulness by the visit of the exuberant shepherds telling of their heavenly visitors, we're told that she "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." In the end, Mary is blissfully filled with the promises and hope of God's activity in her little family's life and perhaps wondering what God has in store for her next.

Many of us are perhaps wondering tonight what life has in store for us as individuals, a nation and a global family. I hope that like Mary we can find strength and peace within by recognizing and treasuring in our hearts our own signs of God's goodness and faithfulness in this Christmas season and beyond.

For me during this season, there has been much to treasure:

- Singing Christmas carols at the men's shelter and seeing the joy on the faces of men who have so little and yet were belting out familiar hymns.
- Laughing longer and harder at our annual staff lunch this year.
- Sharing childhood Christmas memories at our men's breakfast group.
- Performing a very meaningful and much appreciated baptism for a woman with cancer at Johnston Willis Hospital.
- Spending more time looking at the ornaments on our tree and thinking about the different people who gave them to us.

- Receiving a Christmas card this year for the first time from my former wife, Jane. We have all worked very hard over the years to have good relations.
- And I couldn't help but get a big chuckle upon hearing that one of our parishioner's very young grandson wants a shofar or ram's horn for Christmas. He is being raised Christian but goes to preschool at a Jewish Center in Richmond. Good interfaith relations are more important than ever.

Along with Luke's gospel, these are some of the other Christmas gifts from our heavenly parent. May you receive many more of your own, and let us all treasure them deeply in our hearts.
AMEN.