

## Christmas 2006

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

The traditional translation of the nativity narrative from the King James Version of the Bible has a cadence and rhythm that is familiar and comforting. The nativity narrative is a story that we all know. Even changing a few words jars us so we use the old familiar version to comfort us, to warm us, to renew us with the assurance that Jesus, born of Mary is the promised one of God. How often have you heard the story and sung the carols, decorated the tree, wrapped gifts, and enjoyed grand family gatherings? We want to hold deep within our hearts and memories the warmth and peace of Christmas.

The planning, shopping, cooking, wrapping and mailing is done. Relax and hear this message of comfort and great joy. Luke tells the story of Mary and Joseph traveling almost 90 miles to register for a census, an imposed duty by the Roman occupation army. It is not a very convenient time for Mary who is now into her ninth month of pregnancy. She is uncomfortable, riding a donkey on uneven dirt roads, even if Joseph is beside her to offer comfort, and the time is approaching for her to deliver. Pregnancy is a long wait – the body changes in many ways even as the heart and mind begin to imagine the new life taking shape inside. The mother is anxiously ready for the delivery – there is no more room for the baby to grow. To continue his growth he must come forth. As the couple seeks shelter, the inn has no room either and the innkeeper directs the poor family to the barn for the night. As the child, Jesus is born, the labor pains are displaced by joy, the bundle of warmth in Mary's arms is a new life, fragile, vulnerable, right here in her arms. She feels the soft skin, the warmth of his breath on her face, the bright eyes meeting her own. Joy and love come into focus in this one newborn child.

This particular event so well told, in song and story, in pageant and play, in symphony and tradition that we are tempted to miss the life-changing truth embedded within it. Mary and Joseph are looking into the face of God – can they see that? What does it mean to have the transcendent Yahweh, the God of Israel, take the form of a vulnerable, dependent baby?

The birth of the infant Jesus is a defining moment in history – it is a particular event that signals a universal truth. Jesus the son of God is also the Son of Man. This baby represents the love of God poured out for all humanity. This baby is the gift of God wrapped in swaddling cloths, in a humble manger in the care of poor parents on the margin of society. This birth signals the extent to which God will go to reveal God's love for every one of us. Whatever it takes, wherever it must occur, in whatever form, the love God offers to us is presented in life defining and life changing form. Each of us has had some experience that defines who we are and what we understand love to be.

The Christmas ornament that we save year to year, whether or not it is broken, scarred, or pretty, it has a history that defines us. I have a few: an angel that has adorned my tree for over thirty years – she is not grand, or even all that well preserved but she represents much of what has shaped my life, defined who I am. There are ornaments that have come from foreign countries, places where I have met people vastly different in culture, language, and religion but who hold more in common with my humanity than the particularities that separate us. They too have

histories, families, and friends, shared experiences that shape their lives. One of those precious ornaments is a small picture of my first grandson Jeremy.

I was there when Jeremy was born. In that moment, as he cried, his mother cuddled him close to her and spoke his name. He quieted and turned his head to look at her. I wondered at the miracle of new birth, at the world into which Jeremy came, my place in it. I did not know it then, but that moment marked a changed direction in my professional life. I pondered what my study of science could or would mean to Jeremy. Where would the knowledge of viruses and genetics lead in his future? What difference did it make that I lived in two worlds, one inhabited by science and one by faith? Through these questions and conversations with friends, my attention turned to the contemporary issues in bioethics – then to seminary and the priesthood.

We all have a story, a history, and a time of recognition that we are part of something much larger. We come to recognize in the incarnation of the word made flesh a new reality of God with us and in it the most radical instrument of change. Incarnation means change. It means God coming into our time, into our space, into our lives, and into our comfort zone, shaking things up and recreating them in a new way, in a mysterious way that allows us to recognize God in our midst.

Tonight we are gathered here, in the beauty of poinsettias, candlelight, song, and fellowship to share the banquet prepared for us from the beginning of time. God comes in the form of a baby, as God comes among us in community, in loving relationships, in friendship, and in sacrament, drawing us into something mysterious – God's abundant love.

Lest we sentimentalize the nativity story too much, we must remember that the Son of God came in obscurity, to a peasant refugee couple, in an out of the way place, under occupying forces of a foreign army. In this act, God is teaching us that all relationships and all persons are places where we can find God's love. Even in the smallest most humble conditions of life, in the most unexpected places God is present if we are willing to look and see and feel. Like the Shepherds we must go look in the manger to see the miracle of Christmas.

We need to know the love that God offers us. The world into which Jesus was born was a hostile place. The peasants were oppressed, poor, and the peace of Rome offered through Caesar Augustus could not fill the hole in their souls. Even if Caesar proclaimed himself divine, he could not fulfill the desire of the people. From Moscow to London, to Baghdad to Berlin to Jerusalem to Washington DC, none of the world's little Caesars can fill the God-shaped hole in the world's soul. Tonight millions of people have spent billions of dollars to celebrate the birth of the One born in a barn for livestock. Tonight millions of people are spending millions of dollars for food and drink with acquaintances to try and fill that hole. Tonight there are millions of sad and lonely people who long for the touch of another human. Where will we find what we truly seek?

Listen to the angels and look in the manger. God has come to earth looking for you and for me. God has come to set us free from the confusion of power and greed and self to be liberated to love God and one another. God wants everyone in the world to know His love and His peace, the kind money cannot buy and little Caesars cannot provide. The angels have a message for you – the love that will fill the hole in your soul is here – look in the manger, come to Bethlehem and see. Pick up this child, the Prince of Peace, and see how warm and vulnerable God is willing to be to meet you where you are.

In the midst of familiar story, joyous caroling, a table set for you with a personal invitation from God we are being changed. Despite every human inclination to cling to the traditional story, the

familiar translation, the tree, the gifts, the food, we are celebrating the greatest change of human history. God the transcendent one descends in the form of a newborn child, full of grace, to personalize the message of love.

Like the Shepherds long ago coming in from the dark lonely fields, we too can stop looking for love in the wrong places. Take heart, have courage and look in the manger and discover your soul's delight. Listen to the songs of the angels – glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will to men. On this holy night, allow God to embrace you in God's infinite abiding love. Be not afraid – for behold – I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

The good news is that this is the night when heaven and earth are joined in a glorious way with human beings at the center of the union. This is the night when a stable and a star resolve the hopes and fears of all the years. This is the night when we can truly sleep in heavenly peace, because we know that God has entered our world to reclaim it forever. Look into the manger tonight and see the miracle of new birth for you, for me, for everyone. See the face of an innocent child, born to set us free, to reunite us to God, to be present with us at every moment and to accompany us into the eternal embrace of the Trinity.

This familiar story is comfortable, gentle, and yet in it is the profound truth about love that is the only force capable of changing everyone and everything. Look into the manger. See the child. Hear the angels. Let love dwell in you.