

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2011

O God, be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace, that we may leave this place less of what we used to be and more of what we ought to be, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

*The time came for Mary to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn...*

When you think of the nativity scene, what images come to your mind???

If you were here for our 3 o'clock service, you probably would think about boys in shepherd robes, girls in white with silver halos and wings...

Most of you sitting here tonight have sat through your share of Christmas pageants.....with various amounts of chaos.....

In my first parish, we actually had a fight break out during the pageant between one of the sheep and shepherds....

It was a bit disconcerting to see one of the shepherds actually slug a sheep..... so much for the birth of the prince of peace.....

Children's Christmas pageants aside, there are many hymns and nativity sets that paint a tranquil scene of that first Christmas night....

**Silent Night Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright.....**

**O Little town of Bethlehem, How still we see thee lie.....**

Much of what we sing and write about on Christmas Eve tries to capture a peaceful serene feeling....

But if we stop for a moment and picture that night from Mary's perspective, very different emotions come to mind.

From Mary's point of view, it was a frightening, painful, and messy event.

Like most young mothers, I am sure Mary thought the birth of her first born would take place in her home, surrounded by family and friends.

As it happened, nothing went as planned on that first Christmas night. There was the long journey to Bethlehem.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born and Joseph wasn't even able to find them a room outside of the cold.

Our Manger scenes to the contrary, I am sure that Mary was exhausted and disappointed.

And as comforting as Joseph tried to be, they both must have felt alone and hopeless about the future they faced together.

Of course, in today's world, hopes and plans are very much part of the Christmas season.

We make plans to buy presents, prepare special meals, and gather with family and friends for the celebration.

Many of us start the month of December planning how our celebration of Christmas is going to be.

Like many of you, I am guilty of approaching Christmas hoping for a kind of perfection, hoping that this year, our celebration of Christmas will be what it is supposed to be—that our homes will be havens of peace, free of tension and discord, that family members will behave themselves.

We pray that a spirit of gratitude, warmth, and peaceful joy will pervade our homes.

While there is nothing wrong with wanting Christmas to be peaceful, we need to remind ourselves that the story of the birth of Jesus is the story of God coming into the world when things were far from perfect and nothing went as planned.

The emperor in Rome had decreed that everyone was to be counted, because he wanted everyone to be taxed.

The fact that smaller villages like Bethlehem couldn't possibly accommodate everyone who came to their own homes to be enrolled—this meant nothing to the emperor back in Rome.

And to top it off, King Herod was the regional ruler of the time, a terrorist of the first order who had no qualms about the mass murder of innocent children and who even had members of his own family killed.

Things were far from perfect (or safe) on that first Christmas night and until we come to grips with that truth, we can miss the whole point of the Christmas story.

Christmas is the story of God being with us in the least likely times and places of our lives, among the least likely people.

At times of stress, and danger, the message of the angels continues to be this, “be not afraid. In the midst of a troubled world, we bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people”.

We need to remind ourselves at Christmas that God chooses to come to us in the unprepared and unworthy places of human life, not in the comfortable cozy inns.

Because typically, the more we dress up our lives and make them something they're not, the less likely it is that there will be room in us for God.

We have all been guilty of trying to make things as perfect as possible, to make our lives fit a certain image, to live the way we think our commercial culture thinks we are supposed to live.

And somehow, for all our best intentions, things never seem to work out the way we hoped they would.

This is one of the key things that the Christmas story is intended to teach us though...

This unplanned and seemingly haphazard story seeks to shatter the illusion that Jesus dwells only in perfect people and perfect places.

The angels bring good news, not to the emperor in each of us, but to the lowly shepherd that lies beneath the mask that we all wear.

Jesus comes to all of us on this night, regular church goers, occasional attendees and even the doubters among you....

And where does our story tell us that we will find God?

Not in that comfortable inn that had no room for God, but in the drafty and imperfect places of our human lives...this is where God is waiting to meet us this holy night.

The birth of Christ that we celebrate is meaningless unless we believe Jesus is laid in the messy manger of our less than perfect lives.

This is what it means to have an incarnational faith, a faith in a living God that chose to be born into our imperfect world.

When we finally realize that the manger is found within our own bruised and shattered lives, then we are prepared for the central message of Christmas, of God in human flesh...

The most perfect icon of God's presence in the world is not gilded in gold in a magnificent cathedral.

No my friends, the most perfect sign of God's presence in the world is sitting next to you.

And we will know God and the peace for which we have been longing when we finally accept and embrace the imperfect people in our lives and the untidy places in ourselves where God chooses to be born.

Emmanuel is God with us as we are, in all our imperfections, not God with us *as we wish we were*.

The Good News we hear tonight is that Christ is born in our imperfect families and homes. He is born in our imperfect marriages and relationships. He is born in our imperfect church and our imperfect world.

And most importantly to him, Christ is ready to be born again in our imperfect hearts with all our faults and our doubts.

Jesus did not shun the virgin's womb or the manger. He has not shunned your life or mine.

Tonight on Christmas Eve, Jesus welcomes us again to what appears to be a chaotic nativity scene.

It might not suit the Martha Stewart or Emily Post in us, but that perspective misses the whole point of what Christmas should be about.

Tonight is about God's love for all of us, no matter who we are, no matter what we may have done in the past.

Jesus offers us hope tonight, hope in God's promise to redeem us from our sins and more importantly hope for our future.

No one will be turned away this night, even though your shepherd robe is a bit tattered and your halo a bit tarnished.

Jesus waits to welcome you and me.

Merry Christmas