

Christmas Eve Year B 2008

O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that we, who joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *AMEN.*

The long Advent wait is over. We've arrived more or less safely at the yearly festival of the birth of Jesus. We've arrived at this holy night shining, with the brightness of the new light. It's always a toss-up, whether we call this service the one of the collect and lessons of the holy night, or the one, which welcomes Jesus. I pick the collect by the feel of the service—this is the late service, so holy night, it is. Truthfully, I really don't hear any of the lessons except the Luke Gospel. And whatever fad of translation we're reading, I only hear "And a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all should be taxed..." It's what Corey calls the "Linus text." If Linus gets to read it in the glory of the King James language, why-o why can't we. We may, but sadly people don't hear the story for meaning as well in traditional words.

How long do you hear that familiar and beautiful reading before you zone out? Where do you go? Do you hear Linus, see Charlie Brown's tree, and hear that simple piano music, or do you go to some warm home image, or a school play, or some family scene that you treasure, or to one that went sour? Someone was newly missing and Christmas made it all the harder and sadder, and you have to steel yourself against the contradiction of everyone's trying to be happy and you feel worse, and can't rally to "get in the spirit?" Or you went

home, and you weren't welcome with whomever you'd hoped to bring with you, or you just miss walking into a world where it was all done for us, and it was all a wonder? Maybe we hear a little further and are transported right into "Messiah" and happily listen along in our ears until we realize there's really no music playing aloud. I think we all hear the few words: "And a decree went out from Caesar Augustus," and we're off.

What good images come to mind? The fragrance of a real tree filling your house or hot cider warming? Shiny packages under your tree? A favorite relative? Isn't there a mix of sad and glad? Happy for all the people who come to mind, all the aspirations we hoped for, all the promise we had and meant to realize, while sad for the relationships soured, the missed chances to grow and stretch towards fulfilling God's call to each of us? How does this jumble of our personal file of images intersect with Luke's story of the birth of Jesus and how do we hear this story attentively rather than merely as a catapult into our memory banks?

We've been thinking about Mary all week/ We've seen her ordinariness, her real spunk, and her courage, risking hearing God's call to her and letting or inviting God to realize a Son through her. We've also, in the week's collect, been asking for God to find a mansion fit for himself in us— even if we could cope with the pronouns, the idea of being a home for God is hard for us to imagine, and yet Mary accepted that invitation/responsibility/service with only one good question.

We hear this familiar story. Mary and Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem to obey the Roman orders to be registered, and the baby was born. Then an angel told the shepherds nearby that this baby was the Savior, and then they

heard astonishingly lovely music praising God and celebrating the birth, and they raced down the hill to see the family for themselves and tell what they had heard and understood.

Mary listened to what they reported, and she pondered it all in her heart. She knew what had happened, that the baby's birth was a mystery, but she probably didn't expect the public grandeur of the reception by angels and choirs or by excited shepherds. What would it mean for her, for the baby, and for those around them? How much of what she pondered was about Jesus, how much about herself, her family, her community? What might it mean for all of them?

We receive the same invitation not only on this holy night, and annually, at Christmas, we receive the invitation to invite Jesus the Savior into our very being every time we come to this Table. He came into our lives and being eternally, each of us, at our baptism, but the welcome and invitation is renewed as often as we allow ourselves to hear it, to all of us together here, but to each of us here and in those daily visitations.

We too ponder what it means to us. To have the Savior within ourselves, what does that mean we are to do? To feed the hungry, always, to welcome strangers, heal the sick, visit the sad and imprisoned, but how to do that? For each of us the pattern of the ways Jesus lives in and through us varies. Some spend hours and hours setting up flowers so the church will be beautiful.; some practice and perform music; some craft bulletins; most of us vote for elected officials who are committed to fix social ills, but how else do we respond?

Each of us acts as individually and hears the call to service uniquely. Each of us accepts however-we[are- able, that the living, saving God, wants each of us to serve as hands, feet, voices, poets, list-makers, jugglers, teachers, healers, simple members and joiners, listeners and hearers, and as all the

variety of wondrous people created to join in the community of the living God. That's the way Jesus, the dear Christ enters in, silently, persistently to each of us as we are. We carry Jesus in our hearts as Mary did, but we serve the world as Jesus, in joy at his coming. Joy to the world; the Lord is come. That's good news—and Merry Christmas to all.

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