

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Christmas 2011

How many of you have heard our Gospel lesson before? I'm not surprised - it is read every Christmas. How many are familiar with most or all of the Christmas carols we will sing tonight? Again, most of us have heard them since childhood. Christmas is a time when even the most radical of us become traditionalists. We treasure our traditions – the special ornaments, the carols, the pageant, trimming the tree. It wouldn't be Christmas without Mom's special stuffing – even if it comes straight from the recipe on the box.

Christmas focuses on family and home – wherever that might be. "*I'll be home for Christmas*" is a very touching song from WWII that says it all. Christmas is when the world stops magically, time is suspended and everything seems OK. In seminary, we are taught – "Don't mess with Christmas!"

But let's look at this story of the First Christmas more closely. Mary and Joseph aren't nice and comfy in their home in Nazareth. They are compelled to make a difficult trip back to Joseph's ancestral home of Bethlehem. Luke takes his readers back into their Bible to a place of great promise where Samuel anointed the youngest of Jesse's sons to be king over Israel. This runt of a boy grew to be Israel's greatest king, expanding the kingdom to its greatest power. That would ring in Luke's readers' minds. Luke takes them back into their Scriptures to see what he is saying about this child of Mary.

It is a great Biblical truth that sometimes we have to look back in order to understand the present in order to find a way forward. Luke is doing this with his readers so that they will understand what is taking place.

There is no room at the inn but the inn keeper out of compassion lets the couple stay in the stable – there Mary gives birth. It couldn't be more ordinary – a poor woman giving birth

in poor circumstances. It happens every day – always has.

But Luke's story doesn't stay ordinary for long. The divine crashes in and an angel announces to shepherds minding their flocks in the night the Good News of the birth of a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. How can this be? Such momentous news given to shepherds out in the middle of no where? Shepherds were about as low down the social hierarchy as you can get. The angel gives them two signs: the child will be wrapped in bands of cloth and he will be lying in a manger. Then all heck breaks loose and the skies explode with heavenly beings proclaiming God's glory and peace to those whom God favors.

Luke tells us that the shepherds were terrified. This wasn't fear like cowering before danger – no, shepherds were pretty fierce characters; there was a reason they had a reputation! No, they were in awe of something not only unknown but utterly beyond their comprehension – an encounter not only with the holy but with the divine entering our world and our lives. The shepherds learned an old truth – when God touches our lives everything changes.

In the past century, we have largely commercialized this story. The Pope had something to say about that in his address. But of more concern is that we have largely domesticated this story. In a few days or so we'll pack away the ornaments and nativity set and put it away to haul them out next year. We'll get up on Monday and go about our daily tasks. We have increasingly made Christmas about us, about our needs and our pleasure. Yes, all of that is good, very good indeed! But when we let ourselves overshadow the event, we lose it. The truth is that the story isn't about us, but about God. It tells us that the God who brought his people out of slavery in Egypt is a God who wants to pitch his tent with his people. We have a God who desires closeness and relationship with us. Can we really get our minds around that? God desired such closeness that He entered our life and world through the womb of a young woman.

What if this story isn't just an introduction to Luke's Gospel but a description of reality? The birth of this baby in a stable to a young woman makes all life holy – even our mundane daily lives. Maybe it tells us something about God – that God so desires to dwell with God's people that God is just as likely to be found at a truck stop or in a homeless shelter as in a cathedral – maybe more so! Perhaps this Good News is heard best by those most in need of it – and it is what gets them through the day.

There is a story about an old rabbi who was always being asked why are people always looking for God but never seem to find Him. The rabbi thought for a long time and answered, "Perhaps they never think to look so low." Perhaps we are able to encounter Christ in one another, in the beauty of the world He created.

Tonight the Son of God, the Messiah, enters our world and our lives. So tonight, let's sing the old carols, look at the Christmas tree, and go to the table to be fed. As I noted, one of the great Biblical truths is that we have to look back in order to see our way forward in changing times. So tonight let's all be traditionalists and be glad for it. His name is Emmanuel – meaning God with us – and He invites us to go to the manger and be fed.

Mele Kalikimaka!