

St. Thomas's Episcopal Parish in Newark
Newark, DE
Christmas Eve & Christmas Day – December 24 & 25, 2016 Year A
Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20
The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

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May my words reveal the greater glory of God

AMEN

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Merry Christmas! We gather this holy time, the culmination of Advent's journey and in the depths of the winter solstice. We gather into the warmth of Light of God's love divine, all love excelling, in the remembrance of the birth of our Lord Jesus. Many of you come home again to be with family, to be with friends, and to be with your family of faith at St. Thomas's. Welcome you home this most holy and blessed time.

"You are not from here, are you?" Hearing these words spoken to you can simply be off-putting for some. Yet for others **not like me**, they can be chilling and filled with fear by what is said and what is meant by them. These words are a human way of **setting boundaries**, who is inside the circle of a community and who is not.

"You are not from here, are you?" This phrase is not that unusual for Marilyn and me to hear at all. We have heard it repeated in most places of our eighteen moves in our life together. Sometimes they are repeated more often, and with a slight fevered undertone, to ensure we will never quite feel we are from "there" in our time. More often it is not said in ways to separate us, but to offer colloquial and provincial insights, to be helpful. More often, but not always.

"You are not from here, are you?" Each Christmas we hear the story of the birth of Jesus. Each year I am reminded that the operative theme of our faith story is bound in this statement for Mary and Joseph, for the shepherds, for those foreigners from the East, the countless others on the margins of life then and now.

"You are not from here, are you?" Perhaps we can hear these words spoken to us this night. Perhaps we will be the difference in our world from this night forward. bearing the Light come into our world through faith, and binding others into this very precious Light.

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In early church architecture, the roof of the sanctuary was framed at a high angled A-style roof-line like that of St. Thomas's. The church name for this form is **nave**, and it comes to us from nautical terms meaning **"the bottom of a boat or ship."** Most scholars believe this represented the work of the disciples, many of them fishers by vocation before Jesus calling them to ministry. This makes sense to me, yet I wandered in other paths of reflection on this image this year.

I followed the image of the **manger** in which Jesus was laid at his birth. This was the **feeding trough** for the cattle and sheep of the day and to this day. Now here is the direction and reasons my mind wandered onward. We gather in this **nave** for **sanctuary** of being together, bound in the mystery of Light and Love of this holy time, bound with one another, even and especially for those who are not from here. Then we are fed from the **manger** by the holy birth of Jesus, and sent to be Christ's presence **out there**, to feed our hungry world.

In "real world" terms of engaging this holy invitation, I imagine Jesus in our world, wearing the clothes we wear, or perhaps the shoddy, smelly layers of the homeless one. I imagine Jesus in our world in the form of the "girl down the street" we all know, now pregnant by unnamed father ... maybe even the daughter of one of us here tonight. Imagine the Holy Family as one of the countless desperate families fleeing Aleppo and Syria, huddled in some refugee camp, not knowing what tomorrow may bring. I imagine instead of a lowly donkey bearing Mary it becomes a leaky inflatable boat that carries Mary and Joseph away from violence and war toward someplace they hope their child might be born in safety. I imagine the Holy Family showing up at our door seeking food, clothes, or shelter physically and spiritually from the many echoing voices saying **"You are not from here, are you?"**

When we open the eyes of our hearts to see, to REALLY see, Jesus in our world, we then can open our spiritual eyesight and imagination so much more than our intellectual objectivity can bear, and what the world tells us about "those people" and how they should be "handled." This kind of **in-sight** emerges only when we see that the birth of Jesus Christ is also about **the birth of Jesus Christ IN US!** The message of the incarnation not only shows us who Jesus was, fully human and fully divine, but also reveals in the deepest ways **who we most truly are – a messy mixture of the holy and ordinary!** Jesus was **one of us and one with us**, mortal, embodied, and destined to die. In these ways we bear his resemblance by bearing the image of God in our world, and by faith, destined for resurrection.

So hear and see the Christmas story anew this year, with spiritual eyes and ears. Read Luke's story again, and again, and again. Choose a character that calls to your heart now, and how that one may grow in and through you in the days ahead, keeping the soul's door open for holy invitations to live out of this character. Might you be Mary, saying "Yes" to the audacious plans to bring the mercy and justice of God alive in the world? Are you Joseph, digging in by faith to nurture this unconventional family for the sake of Love? Might you be a shepherd, humbly doing the work no one else in that world would consider doing, amazed and awe-struck in receiving the miraculous message deigned for kings? Might you just be part of the crowds around the inn, not noticing anything around you but simply wanting to pay your taxes and get on with your life? **Who will you be this Christmas? Who of those "others" might bring you Good News your tired soul needs to hear?**

Joining this old story anew can open you to see the stories LIVING through you as well, the story of God that you are called to be. Might you see and hear this old story calling you in this new ways to embrace and embody the grace that is present all around us to every one of us? **Where is Love trying to be born in you and around you, right now?**

Reflecting on the events of life all round us this holy night, I hold heavily the world that seeks to divide, dissolve, and destroy the human spirit and the Christmas miracle. The endless wars in the world, particularly in Syria and the inhumanity of Aleppo; continued terror attacks in places around the world and in our country; divisive language and acts out of a media-frenzied political season that leaves us raw in our hearts and fractured in our relationships. It is simply more than one person can bear, so my nature tells me to escape by going inward, taking care of my own.

And then ...

I heard anew a portion of **The Winter Wood Arrives** by Mary Oliver. A poet born of the harsh Northeast winter, I heard her say to me, **“How to keep warm is always a problem, isn’t it? Of course, there’s love. And there’s prayer. I don’t belittle them, and they have warmed me, but differently, from the heart outwards.”**

“What did you GET for Christmas” is the usual question that echoes the days to come. It does not last all that long before we move on in our lives. Might I invite you to bear a different question for yourself and to others, a question to be lived by faith that can feed you so you can feed others – **“What will you GIVE of Christmas?”**

Dr. Howard Thurman was a brilliant scholar, educator, prolific writer and preacher. A person of deep faith undergirding the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960’s with Dr. Martin Luther King and many others. I offer these words as prayer. May they be the gift of Christmas lived by faith. The prayer is **I Seek Room for Peace ...**

“I seek the enlargement of my heart that there may be room from Peace. Already there is room enough for chaos. There is in every day’s experience much that makes for confusion and bewilderment. Often I do not quite understand quite how my relations with others become frayed and chaotic. Sometimes this chaos is a positive thing; it means that something new, creative, and whole is beginning to pull together the tattered fragments of my relationship with a person and to fashion it into that which delights the spirit and makes glad the heart. Sometimes the chaos is negative, a sign of degeneration in a relationship once meaningful and good. There is room enough for chaos.

But the need of my heart is for room for Peace. Peace of mind that inspires singleness of purpose. Peace of heart that quiets all fears and uproots all panic. Peace of spirit that filters through all confusions and robs them of their power. This I seek now! I know that here is this quietness my life can be infused with Peace.

Before God, I seek the enlargement of my heart at this moment, that there will be room for Peace.”

Merry Christmas ... AMEN