

Christmas Eve 2012

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 3:4-7

Luke 2:1-20

When the time comes  
Nothing can stop a baby  
From beginning its journey  
Towards the light.

And so babies have been born  
In the most inconvenient,  
Dangerous, dirty,  
And startling circumstances we could ever imagine.

One night a friend of mine,  
Working intake at a downtown emergency room,  
Was called to come quickly  
To the front door,  
Where a woman had just given birth  
In the back seat of a car.  
This was not new to her,  
And she reassured the frantic father  
That all would be well.

What stopped her in her tracks  
When she got to the open door of the car  
Was the sight of a huge sneaker  
Dangling from the newborn baby's stomach.

What is this,  
She asked the father.  
They told us in class, he said,  
That if the baby was born in the back seat of the car,  
You could use a shoelace  
To tie off the cord.

By some grace,  
She managed to bite back her words,  
And did not say,  
Yes, but they expected  
That you would know  
To take the shoelace out of the shoe.  
Instead,

She wrapped her arm around his shoulders,  
And said,  
You did a great job.  
Everything is going to be fine.

Was Joseph that nervous,  
If he was the only one standing by,  
When young Mary brought forth her firstborn son?

Then there is the pregnant woman  
in Faulkner's double story  
"The Wild Palms."  
Rescued from the flooding Mississippi  
By an escaping convict,  
She is washed up by a giant wave  
Onto a shell mound,  
Where she gives birth  
In the slick and slime,  
And cuts the cord  
With the lid of a tin can.

Now, she says to the convict,  
If I could just have a little hot water.  
Out of nothing,  
He makes a fire, salvages a can,  
Takes water from the churning river,  
And boils it.  
The woman washes the baby,  
Wraps him in her own clothes,  
Nurses him,  
And falls profoundly asleep.  
The convict watches over her,  
On the muddy bank,  
As the great river goes streaming by.

A stable, by comparison,  
Sounds warm and safe and clean.

Mary had Joseph standing by,  
She had cloth to wrap up her baby,  
And a manger in which to lay him.

She had visitors, and strange words to ponder in her heart.  
This is the story we cherish,  
The image passed on to us  
In a very few lines of scripture.

What if she had more than this?  
What if there were confident experienced women  
with sure and gentle hands  
to help at the birth of her first child?  
Children to gaze in wonder,  
Men to keep watch and bring word?

What if, instead of resting alone in a stable,  
She was held close in the embrace of family,  
Safe at the center of a welcoming home?

Some scholars have begun to suggest,  
Based on literary critical readings  
Of the well known text,  
And an understanding  
Of the social world of the ancient near east,  
And a look at archaeological evidence,  
These scholars suggest  
That Jesus was born in a home.

Simple Palestinian houses had then,  
And until a generation or two ago  
Still had,  
Two rooms.  
The family slept in one room.  
At night,  
The family brought the animals inside with them,  
Sometimes to a separate area within their room,  
Set off from their sleeping place,  
Maybe with a lower floor  
Dug down into the earth.

The other room  
Was reserved for guests.

It is the word for guest room  
That the gospel writer uses  
In saying that there was no room  
For Mary and Joseph.  
There is another word for inn,  
Which the gospel writer uses  
In the story of the Good Samaritan.  
In this story,  
There is no room in the guest room.

While Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem,  
His ancestral home,  
The time came for her to have her baby.  
They were in the family room of someone's home,  
Because there was no room in the guest room.  
They shared the space  
Where the animals were kept at night,  
And Mary laid her baby  
In the feed trough in that space.

A story can be told in many different ways.  
If you choose,  
You can take this image,  
And set it beside the countless images  
Of Mary and Joseph and the baby  
In a cave, or a stable.

It is not that different,  
And yet, in some ways,  
It is.

What might it mean  
To see the baby Jesus  
Nestled at the center of a home?

For years and years,  
We have pictured Mary and Joseph wandering,  
Pleading,  
Searching for a place to lay their heads,  
Their search growing more urgent  
As it becomes clear that this baby,  
Like so many others,  
Might come at an inconvenient,  
Difficult moment.

Some cultures enact this search,  
Parading through the streets  
from one posada to another.  
Advocates for the homeless  
Work with this image to move our hearts.  
That's all to the good.  
Stories shape our thoughts and our lives,  
And we make meaning of the story of the homeless baby Jesus  
In ways that urge us to act with courage and compassion.

But if we choose, we can add another layer

Of story and meaning.

We could picture Jesus emerging into a warm,  
Safe, inviting place.  
We could picture family around him.  
A fitting beginning for the Jesus  
Who loved parties,  
Loved to gather with friends around the table,  
Who actually,  
If you read the gospels carefully,  
Did have a home,  
And found a home with others  
When he took to the road.

Both these stories are true –  
No room in the inn,  
And no room in the guest room,  
So a place in the family room.

There are times when our hearts are closed,  
And there is no room in the inn,  
When the message of this night  
Needs to be, open your heart,  
And find a place  
Where the Christ child can make a home.

But if our hearts are already open,  
Then it does us no good,  
And sells God short,  
To keep on hammering away  
At a door that is already open wide.

When the door is open,  
Then we need to move on,  
And find the next challenge  
On the journey in faith.  
That is the gift  
We find in the image of Jesus born at home.

Is it possible we have grown in love,  
And are ready for the challenge of the next step?  
Are we ready to say,  
Our hearts are already open,  
And we do have room within our own room,  
And we are ready to help the baby to be born,  
To befriend him,

To watch over him  
And bring the happy news?

God comes helpless into the world,  
A real baby,  
Who needs mature and loving helpers  
And friends.

God grows up among us,  
Taking on authority like a mantle  
And establishing peace and justice.  
God needs partners  
To bring this promised peace into the world.

God needs faithful and mature friends  
In order to thrive in the world.  
God can wait,  
While we grow up,  
But when we are ready,  
God is ready for us.

This night is an invitation.  
There is a baby sleeping in our very midst,  
A baby who has all the shelter, and love we can offer.

That is good, and right.  
And babies, as they grow, need more.

Are you ready to grow with him,  
As he grows?

Are you ready to walk with him,  
As he learns to walk?

Are you ready to make a future with him,  
A future we build together,  
In partnership with God?

That is one way to hear  
The good news the angels bring this night.