

## Christmas Eve 2009

On a cold Christmas Eve almost 200 years ago, a new little parish in a small town was getting ready for its Christmas Eve service. The church was decorated... maybe a little like ours here tonight with greens and holly and flowers. The candles were all in place. The new altar with its new hangings was gleaming from the front. It smelled and looked like Christmas. But, unfortunately, it didn't sound like Christmas. The clergymen were wringing their hands. The organ had broken down. Perhaps mice had been nibbling at the bellows. No matter how nice the new church building was, or how long the people had worked on the decorations, it was going to be a huge disappointment to everyone that there was no music for Christmas.

What would the feast day be without the organ to accompany the traditional carols that everyone expected to sing on Christmas Eve? In a last minute attempt to have a little something to sing, the assistant priest wrote some simple lyrics and brought them to the organist. His idea was that the two of them would sing this song as a duet with a guitar and a chorus of girls' voices. The organist was not in a position to be picky about what they would sing. There weren't many options. So, he quickly composed a tune to match the little poem.

So, at the Christmas Eve service that night in 1818, with the new church filled with people, the priest, Joseph Mohr, picked up his guitar, stood with the organist, Franz Gruber, in the chancel and they began to sing their little duet:

Stille Nacht, heilige nacht!

We will sing that same simple song near the end of our service tonight. It has become the mainstay of Christmas Eve services everywhere. One might even go so far as to say that it wouldn't be Christmas Eve without "Silent Night".

I think what draws us all to the famous hymn is precisely its simplicity and the way the poetry draws us into the scene of the holy family. We feel as though we are right there on a still and holy night, watching Mary and Joseph care for their new little infant. There is no fanfare,

there are no trumpets. There is just the peaceful quiet of a newborn sleeping in heavenly peace.

And that is just the picture that Luke paints for us too in his Gospel account of the birth of Jesus. First of all, because Luke is very concerned to be sure that we know that this is a birth that takes place at a specific time in history, he tells us what was going on in the Roman dominated world, and in Palestine, when Jesus was born. The Caesar of the time was Octavius. Luke tells us was the governor over Syria, Quirinius. And we are told why the holy family had to travel to Bethlehem at a time when Mary should have been staying close to home.

We are told only the barest of details of the birth. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem. There was no room in the inn. So Jesus was born in a stable, or cave; somewhere where animals were kept, was laid in an animal's feed trough, a manger. That's it. There is no miracle. There are no Magi, or Kings in Luke's story. There is only a poor, ordinary couple, and their poor seemingly ordinary baby.

But! What is happening in the fields nearby... now that is what is very different about this story! While Mary and Joseph are busy with ordinary tasks of taking care of a newborn, the shepherds' experience something quite remarkable. They also are poor, unwashed and working a job that is considered to be at the bottom of the social barrel. So, who does God choose to tell the news that there has been a baby born that will change the world? God does not bother with Kings, emperors, governors, the wealthy or the well fed, but God sends his messengers the angels to tell the shepherds. Glory is streaming from heaven above and the heavenly hosts sing alleluia.

Maybe... just maybe... the angels and God's glory were there for **anyone** to see but the shepherds were the only ones who noticed.

I usually take my dog out for a short walk just before bedtime. These days in the really cold nights it is a really short walk, just out to the field in front of our house and back. But while I'm out there I look up at the sky and the stars twinkling. I look at the dark bare branches of the trees swaying back in forth in the breeze. I see the smoke curling up from the fireplace at the house next door and hear the wind whistling through the pine trees at the edge of the field. I feel in those quiet times that I can smell the snow that is still on the ground in the crisp winter air.

Almost always, when I'm out there looking up at that brilliant night sky, I think about how, if I didn't have to come out to walk the dog, I would never even notice this breathtaking beauty. When I'm inside making dinner, doing laundry, watching TV or reading a book, how I don't even think about the awesome sights and sounds that is just a few steps right outside my door.

Those shepherds were certainly much more in touch with what was going on in the realms of earth and space than were the city dwellers. It's easy to imagine that God's presence might be much more readily experienced by the shepherds than King Herod in his palace. It's really just the same now as it was then. Their closeness to nature and awareness of their surroundings made them ready to receive the message of the angels. The message they got was that God was doing something new and important that would have a direct bearing on their lives.

Now, some of you may be thinking, "Well, awareness of nature and appreciation of it is a fine thing, but how do you go from there to then believing that angels visited the shepherds. Believing in angels isn't practical."

And you would be absolutely right. For many of us, angels are a difficult thing to accept. We are modern intelligent thinkers, and the idea of angels is pretty farfetched. There is no scientific proof of angels. And, more than that, we are Anglicans. From the time of Richard Hooker who lived in England around 1600, we have believed that God makes himself known to

us in the threefold ways of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. Well, in the Christmas season maybe not so much reason. Christmas is for a time of Christ experienced through Scripture and Tradition and not Christ carefully and logically thought out by use of our God given intelligence.

Not everything in life is an intellectual operation. Whether you are a scholar, a scientist, a skeptic, or a religious, we can all be united in our faith by understanding that it is **God at work** that Luke is telling us about in his poetic language. There may be the Roman Caesar Augustus who thinks he has control over his kingdom by brute force; requiring a census to be taken for taxation and inscription, but God's kingdom is far more powerful, and is at work in a little backwater town in Palestine.

God's kingdom, Jesus will tell us later, is of a very different sort. And God's economy will always bend towards justice and peace.

God is also at work here and now in this place and in you and me. Once a year you come here to hear the story that God tells us about his love for us in the birth of Jesus who is our Messiah. This year I am privileged to be here with you and share in the beauty of this church, the great music and faithful musicians, and the lovely traditions of Trinity Church. God willing, I will be here for more years to come, because even in this short time I have seen how our family of faithful, caring people works so well together. In this place God's glory also streams from heaven above. We just have to step outside of our own comfortable homes to experience it.

We come together year by year at Christmas to wake up again, or wake up some more. We come here to hear God speak to us through the angels, and through the story of a simple baby that brought hope to a world that was sorely in need of it, as we still are today.

Through the simple birth of Jesus we can remember to simply be aware, awake and alive to experience glories streaming from heaven above and heavenly hosts singing alleluia. Christ the savior is born!