



Christmas Eve 2014: Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver, BC
8:00 and 11:00 PM
The Rt. Rev. Melissa M. Skelton

Luke 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

We had a Christmas pageant my last Christmas at Trinity Church on the coast of Maine. Written by one of our parishioners, the pageant had very few spoken lines, something we all thought would lessen the performance anxiety of the children who were given specific roles in the play. And so the narrator, an earnest twelve-year old girl, did most of the talking as angels, shepherds, animals and the holy family moved through their paces, uttering the occasional line for dramatic emphasis

Little Chaz was cast as the innkeeper, the one whose job it was to tell Joseph and the teenaged pregnant Mary, that despite their need to find a place for the night, that there was no room at the inn.

Chaz was the shortest and most delicate young boy in the parish. Not much taller than a fire hydrant, he sported a mass of curly blond hair, and was allergic to everything, including the Christmas greens. That night, dosed with his allergy medicine and resplendent in a green velvet vest that his mother had made him for the occasion, he was ready for his part, ready to deliver the one, very important line he had been given to say. At the appointed time, he was to walk across the front of the church holding a small, bright, lit lantern and to cry out, “There is no room at the inn!”

But as one might expect, despite the best efforts of our playwright, Chaz, the angels, the shepherds, the animals, Joseph and the Virgin Mary, herself, were all gripped by performance anxiety. And so when Chaz’s big moment came, looking dapper in his vest, he walked across the front of the church completely speechless while carrying a dark, unlit lantern lifted high in his small and shaky hand.

Most of the people there that night, of course, were not aware of the line that Chaz had dropped, but I was. And though it was, of course, all just about a little boy’s performance anxiety, I went another way with it. I thought: how perfect that this little one in his stunned silence lifting high his unlit lantern is expressing just how shocking and appalling it was that the beleaguered Joseph and Mary could find no hospitable place in which to give birth to the Holy One of God.

Biblical scholars are quick to point out that the text in Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth is a little more ambiguous than the typical Christmas pageant portrays it to be. The word we usually translate “inn” in Greek simply means a room for guests. And so it’s quite conceivable that what’s being said about Mary and Joseph is only that they were not able to get the guest room in someone’s house, presumably because so many were in the town on account of the census. What this might have meant, then, was that they had to bed down for the night in what the story calls a “manger” where the animals were kept, typically in an area under a house. This was the spot, according to Luke’s story, where Jesus was born.

For me, regardless of the specific place the couple gained or did not gain admittance to for the night, Luke’s point seems to be that Jesus was born into a family that, like most everyone else, was subject to imperial mandates, and that the birth occurred in a place of great humility, where the animals were kept, a place one would never expect a new king to be born.

And so Christmas is all about disrupted expectations—our disrupting expectations that during our time on the road (which is at all times) that we will encounter hospitable inns or at least guest rooms with our names on them along the way. Christmas is all about disrupted expectations—our disrupted expectations that during our performances (which is at every moment) we will be able to remember our lines and carry lit lanterns to find our way in the dark. Christmas is all about disrupted expectations—our disrupted expectations that life itself with all its relationships and its activity will somehow flow along more predictably, more smoothly and more easily.

And so, God help us, at Christmas we get to be in touch with our high expectations of ourselves, of our families and friends, of our churches, and of life itself. And right along with this we get to practice finding ourselves down with the animals instead of in the guest room or the hospitable inn

with the latest amenities. We get to practice what it feels like to forget our lines and let our lamp go out as we wish we were moving across the stage of our lives with a will-lit beauty and grace.

Poet William Stafford (whom I cannot stop talking about) taught many writing courses and talked to many students about the writing process. One of the questions he was often asked was what he did when he encountered writers' block, the inability to come up with anything in the face of our and others' lofty expectations of the writing we should be able to produce. Stafford's response to his students' questions was simple—"I never have writers' block," he said. "I just lower my standards." He was so attached to this idea, in fact, that he came to believe that the rough treasures that would later become the center of his most provocative works were found only in the writing he did in which he had "lowered his standards," that is, in which he had accepted the material that flowed from him that did not meet his own or others' loftier expectations.

And so tonight, strangely, I want to tell you to lower your standards. Lower your expectations that the hospitable inn or the guest room is where you need to be for God to be born in you or through you. Lower your standards. Lower your expectations that your lines will always roll off your lips or your lantern will always be lit. Lower your standards. Lower your expectations that the Prince of Peace, the lover of souls, will be found in either the well-lit room or the perfectly orchestrated and acted play. Lower your standards. Lower your expectations that liberation, peace, or healing will be found in nicer places rather than in the raggedy lives we already live or through our raggedy efforts to do a good thing. Lower your standards. Live in and from the mangers that God has made available to you, for these and no other are the kinds of places where our God chooses to be born.

So in a sense I believe that Joseph and Mary *had to* go to the manger to birth our Jesus into the world; the Prince of Peace and Mighty Counselor *had to* open his eyes for the first time in a place that some would say was beneath him, and we *have to* be willing to let our expectations go and to go to the manger and find our life there, find the new things that want to be born in us and through us there.

Marion Wright Edelman tells the story of yet another pageant some years ago. It took place in a much larger place, in New York City's Riverside Church. In this pageant, the children actors all spoke the lines in Luke's Gospel as well as others that would move the story along. A boy named Tim who was born with Downs Syndrome played the innkeeper who, of course, had one line and one line only.

"There's no room in the inn." He was supposed to say to Mary and Joseph when they came to his door looking for a place to stay.

Tim, of course, wanted very much to do well and so had practiced his line over and over with his parents and the pageant director until he had it.

At any rate, as the pageant got underway, Tim's parents and the pageant director began to get nervous. As the big moment approached, Tim stood at the very front of the church, all by himself and clothed in his bathrobe, as the girl and boy playing Mary and Joseph slowly made their way down the center aisle. Once there, Joseph went through the motions of knocking on a door. After Tim went through the motion of opening the door, Joseph inquired as to whether the inn might have a room for them that night. Silence ensued during which time Tim's parents, the director, and the whole audience leaned forward willing him to remember his line.

After a moment this is what everyone heard: "There's no room in the inn" Tim boomed out, perfectly.

But then, as Mary and Joseph turned around to travel farther, that is, to make their way back down the aisle in search of another place to stay, Tim suddenly yelled, "Wait!"

"You can stay at my house," he called out.

This Christmas, may you experience the coming of God into your house, into your life and into this world: a God who chooses to inhabit, to embrace and to make holy all disrupted expectations and all that is *not* high and uplifted. For in Christ heaven and earth are joined. Heaven and our lives are joined.