

Late Christmas Eve, 2009

Luke 2:1-20; Titus 2:11-14

In those days the story began, in a time shaped by those in power: there was a harmonized sales tax, travellers had been stranded on trains or in airports due to bad weather, an agency that had gathered food and gifts for the poor was robbed of most of its store, a small group of women burned out of their homeless shelter depend on the generosity of others so that they can eat, a sign over a concentration camp “work will set you free” was stolen and then recovered, and medical care for all is in doubt, and the planet is in jeopardy due to global warming, and the death of a friend....in those days the very word of God said, “do not be afraid.”

We live in a time of census and taxes a time shaped by business as usual, authoritative pronouncements from those in charge, fear of terrorists, of a shaky economy, uncertainty about how we can afford to retire, We even live in a time where our commitments to religious communities means that we are alone in our struggles and often neglect the words and the deeds of hope.

The manger of Bethlehem is God’s alternative – the manger speaks to us that God is yearning to dwell among us. The child, the infant Jesus is the fulfilment of a very old promise, “and I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.” (Lev. 26:12) And many listened and believed God’s desire for they had had enough of fear.

In those days Titus had been left behind in Crete, a community that was resistant to faith. The search committee had put an ad in the paper. “Solo pastor wanted by small congregation in Crete. Our people are known to be liars, vicious brutes and gluttons. Their minds and consciences are corrupted. They profess to know God but they deny Him by their actions. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for any good work. A great challenge for the right person. Low pay and few rewards. No rectory.” God shows up in Crete; God comes to them through a faithful shepherd of Christ who knows that Jesus will show up on every doorstep of despair and doubt even in Titus.

In those days He will show up at the tables of the self-righteous, on the doorstep of leprosy, all sorts of sickness and blindness and loose living. He will touch and forgive, he will feed his flock, he will leave a memorial meal, and violence will not destroy Him or his rising. The favour of God, the grace of God comes to all – the rich and the poor, the self satisfied and the anxious. Jesus was born to and for us.

This is the gospel, the good news announced to us in these days. In this day, in this night, the fears and sins of the world, the fears and sins in us, are met by the face of God in the grace and compassion of Jesus. Weary like Mary and Joseph we are longing to learn how to shape the real meaning that goes beyond our daily demands and concern. Marginalized and ignored like the shepherds we want to be in the places where God is revealed. Travellers who have survived a great deal seek a place of welcome even if it is on the edge of comfort and joy.

In those days when Elizabeth was still the queen, and Stephen Harper was prime minister and Dalton McGuinty the premier, when Larry O’Brien the mayor of Ottawa and Rowan Williams the Archbishop of

Canterbury, in those days the word of God came to those gathered at night around a manger bed. Candles in hand and singing carols on Bel- Air Drive, they heard again, "do not be afraid." There is good news of great joy for all the people. TO YOU is born this day a Saviour who is the Messiah of God. Rejoice and again I say rejoice.

If we get Christmas, then perhaps we can take the lesson from Henry van Dyke and keep it.

Addendum, Late Christmas Eve

Henry Van Dyke, Keeping Christmas

"It is a good thing to observe Christmas Day, The mere marking of times and seasons, when men agree to stop work and make merry together, is a wise and wholesome custom. It helps one to feel the supremacy of the common life over the individual life. It reminds a man to set his own little watch, now and then, by the great clock of humanity which runs on sun time.

But there is a better thing than the observance of Christmas day, and that is, keeping Christmas. Are you willing to forget what you have done for other people, and to remember what other people have done for you; to ignore what the world owes you, and to think what you owe the world; to put your rights in the background, and your duties in the middle distance, and your chances to do a little more than your duty in the foreground; to see that your fellowmen are just as real as you are, and try to look behind their faces to their hearts, hungry for joy; to own that probably the only good reason for your existence is not what you are going to get out of life, but what you are going to give to life; to close your book of complaints against the management of the universe, and look around you for a place where you can sow a few seeds of happiness – are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.

Are you willing to stoop down and consider the needs and the desires of little children; to remember the weakness and loneliness of people who are growing old; to stop asking how much your friends love you, and ask yourself whether you love them enough; to bear in mind the things that other people have to bear on their hearts; to try to understand what those who live in the same house with you really want, without waiting for them to tell you; to trim your lamp so that it will give more light and less smoke, and to carry it in front so that your shadow will fall behind you; to make a grave for your ugly thoughts, and a garden for your kingly feelings, with the gate open – are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.

Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world – stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death – and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem nineteen hundred years ago is the image and brightness of the Eternal Love? Then you can keep Christmas.

And if you keep it for a day, why not always?

But you can never keep it alone.

