

cChristmas Eve ~ December 24, 2009 ~ A homily preached by The Rev'd Erl G. Purnell at Old St. Andrew's Church, Bloomfield, CT

Isaiah 9.2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2.11-14; Luke 2.1-20

*"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus ..."* We've heard those words before. Every Christmas Eve in modern memory the lectionary has assigned Luke 2.1-20 as the Gospel reading. It's not that there are a lot of choices. After all, among the Gospels, only Luke tells this story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the manger, the star, the shepherds, the angels. All wonderful images. Powerful images. Images of joy and hope and promise. And surely, that was Luke's intention.

We need to remember, too, that the Hebrew people held to an ancient expectation, that a great light would come to shine in the darkness. When Isaiah wrote words about that expectation centuries before Jesus, it was not the darkness of Roman occupation about which he spoke. But Jesus' contemporaries quickly and easily applied Isaiah's promise to their quest for freedom from their own oppression—the boot and sword of the Romans and their own Temple-based theocracy.

One other Jewish expectation. The Messiah, the Christ, he had to come from Bethlehem. The Messiah would be from the house of David and David's hometown was Bethlehem. So Luke placed the nativity exactly where it was supposed to be—in Bethlehem.

Here we are back to expectations. I talked a lot about expectations during Advent. My bottom line? What if expectations—high expectations, low expectations, and no expectations at all—are abandoned, allowing something beyond expectation to happen. The notion is that whatever happens through the Spirit will be more than we can possibly imagine. It will be wonder and blessing beyond all possibility.

For Luke, what comes in the Jesus story is a paradoxical Prince of Peace in the form of a child born to an un-wed teenage girl in a backwards place at a backwards time. Around the child, Luke sprinkles the mundane—barnyard animals, a manger, and shepherds. How unlikely. How unlikely such a scene in and of itself would draw any kind of attention.

But our Luke is a master of juxtaposition and he knows that his listeners—1<sup>st</sup> century people—can mix and match images easily. And so, he cloaks the ordinary with the holy—a massive star and choruses of angels. The expected is not to be seen in that either. Wonder and blessing, however, are abundant, Luke's very purpose.

For Luke, writing at least 50 years after Jesus' death, telling the nativity of Jesus attests to the real wonder about the Jesus who was remembered by real people after his death.

Did the nativity happen as Luke portrays? Was Jesus actually born in Bethlehem? Was there an super-bright star? Was the date December 25<sup>th</sup>? We can't know. But, Luke relates as best he can, how, in Jesus, the holy is wed to the mundane.

Each of us has a unique understanding of the Jesus story—the nativity, Jesus' life and teaching, his death, and the extraordinary image of the resurrection. For Luke's contemporaries, this nativity story with these images make perfect sense. They are accustomed to seeing the truth within images, stories, and parables—far beyond the literal.

And so, to repeat myself, in Luke's Gospel, the holy unites with the mundane and we experience a wonder and blessing far beyond anything imagined or expected. A child of hope, Wonderful Counselor, the Prince of Peace. Of course we resonate with Luke's nativity story!

The which brings me to the message of my Christmas letter. Because these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are such extraordinary times, and even as we celebrate the birth of Jesus tonight, we cannot and should not forget the whole of the Christ story.

Through Jesus' grace—who he was, how he lived and treated others, what he did, and even in his death—compassion, forgiveness, justice and love are at the very heart of the Christ story. We are called to live in a particular way—as participants in the Body of Christ, to continue the life and work of Jesus, the child born this night. The joy of Christmas matters only when we fulfill the notion of love without reservation, justice with equivocation, forgiveness without reservation, and compassion without hesitation.

For Christmas 2009, when you leave this place, won't you go into the world and give away Christ's grace and love to all whom you meet? The world will not expect you to *BE* that way, but *BE* Christ's grace and love anyway.

*Amen.*