

“Treasuring and Pondering”

Rev. Shannon Rye Wall  
December 24, 2010  
Christmas Eve  
8:00 p.m.  
Service of Lessons and Carols

It has become commonplace for Christians to bemoan the commercialization and Santa-ization of Christmas. This year, I’m struck as well by the sanitization of Christmas. The crèche is so neat, the children in the pageant well scrubbed, our sanctuary so peaceful and gorgeous. I love it all—I really do. It’s glorious.

And the first Christmas was decidedly different, and dirtier and more difficult.

The images of Christmas in my mind have been shaped more by traditions, carols, and picture books from Germany, England and New England than by the realities described in Matthew and Luke’s accounts. While there is occasionally snow on Mount Hermon in northeastern Israel, it doesn’t snow in the little town of Bethlehem. Joseph was from Nazareth—a scruffy little town it was then and a scruffy little town it remains. People asked, routinely and rhetorically, “Could anything good come from Nazareth?”

On the night in which the child would be born, the unmarried Mary and Joseph found themselves in Bethlehem, where they had been forced to go as part of an empire-wide census ordered by the occupying Roman armed forces. Imagine a foreign country ruling here and issuing an edict for each of us to return to our birthplace to be counted. What turmoil! It would not only be inconvenient; people would suffer, particularly those without the means to travel. This was not a vacation trip to Bethlehem.

And then, when at last they arrived, the town was overrun with people. No room at the inn. The manger, the animals, the straw—they were probably not as clean and comfortable as we have come to imagine them. Overall, the circumstances in which Mary and Joseph found themselves were not fortuitous.

And yet. With God, there is always an “and yet.” And yet, it was a holy night, a night marked by angels’ songs and the adoration of shepherds. It was a night when Mary treasured the shepherds’ words and pondered them in her heart. It was a night when the promises that Mary and Joseph had heard from angels before Jesus’ birth lived in their hearts with power—with more power than the impoverished and oppressed circumstances in which he was welcomed into the world.

Life is both holier and more difficult than we can appreciate, most of the time. The manger was dirty and glorious. Far from home and family, Mary and Joseph must have been both afraid and enraptured by the new life in their arms.

Just like the first Christmas, our circumstances may be both more difficult and more blessed than our idealized images of Christmas allow us to admit.

This Christmas, know that you can be both deeply sad and deeply grateful. Know that you can have empty pockets and be rich toward God. You can have absolutely no idea what the future will bring and have peace of mind. You can be lonely and know that you are loved and cherished.

The circumstances of your life do not determine your life. Your life isn't perfect—no one's is. Christmas doesn't have to be perfect—it won't be. But it can be an imperfect, blessed, and holy time.

Take up both the sorrows and joys you bring with you this night. Carefully, lovingly hold them in your arms, as Mary held Jesus, as God holds you. This is your life. All of it. Treasure it, and ponder it in your heart. Amen.