

Christmas Eve Year B – Morning Service Trinity Episcopal Church
The Rev. Dr. Paul J. Carling December 24, 2017

Coming Home

Isaiah 9: 2-7; Luke 2: 1-20

In my mom's later years, her favorite pastimes were writing letters, and telling stories. She loved telling how my twin brother Frank and I were almost born in a taxi. You see, my father, when she was in full blown labor, was forced to watch her sit at the kitchen table writing "just one more note." She'd delivered three other boys in the same relaxed way, while my Dad fretted, "*How in heaven's name, will we ever get to the hospital?*"

As we just heard in our gospel play, Mary and Joseph had a much worse problem. At least a week before what we now call Christmas Eve, and about to give birth, they set off on an 80 mile trip by donkey to Bethlehem. Turned away from the inn, Mary gives birth to Jesus in a feeding trough, surrounded by barn animals and shepherds. The angel Gabriel's visit nine months before seemed like a distant dream – maybe even a temporary insanity. But then, miraculously, the dream comes to life again. The shepherds deliver their amazing message that Jesus is the Messiah, and a multitude of angels burst into song.

There's an ancient Jewish tradition that before a baby is born, they know the entire Bible, but then an angel crosses a finger over their lips to seal that truth within them. Supposedly, that's the origin of the *philtrum*, that little crease we all have between our nose and our upper lip.

Barbara Brown Taylor, one of my favorite preachers, wonders if this isn't why God chose to come to us as a baby.

"In all of God's attempts to get our attention," Taylor writes, "perhaps God... noticed that babies were the one kind of human being that had no trouble hearing God. They were all the time laughing at God's jokes or crying when God cried, which went right over their parents' heads. "Colic," the grownups would say, or "Isn't she cute? She's laughing at the dust mites in the sunlight." Only she wasn't of course. She was laughing because God had just told her it was cleaning day in heaven, and... what she saw were the fallen stars that angels were shaking from their feather dusters. Babies didn't go to war. They never made hate speeches, or littered, or refused to play with each other because they belonged to different political parties or cultures...

They depended on other people for everything... and a phrase like "self-made babies" would make them laugh until their bellies hurt... While no one asked their opinions about anything..., almost everyone seemed to love them, and that gave God an idea. Why not create God as one of them?"

As the baby Jesus looked beyond the faces of Mary and Joseph, he saw they were surrounded by people filled with expectant hope and people consumed with political cynicism, people open to love and people beset by fear, people just like us. Just as God gazes upon the world this morning, and sees how joyous Christmas is for some, and how painful it is for others.

Today, some of us woke up in a house where the beds are full again with family who've come home for the holidays, and will run downstairs in just a few hours to look for that special present under the tree. And others are struggling this morning, caught up in war, or waking up under the bridge where they slept last night. Some of us greet family and friends we haven't seen in much too long a time, while others are alone, surrounded by holiday rituals designed for two, maybe missing someone terribly we've lost this year; and some of us find that, no matter how hard we try, our Christmas never quite measures up to the fantasy we're told it should be, but actually never was. On Christmas Eve, each of us, in our own way, tries to find our way home.

We've all been babies, so as we gaze upon the Christ child in the manger, we're reminded that in the end, we are all one. Our communities, our families, our souls are ungainly and wild – and yet when we see them all together, we see them as a whole, healed of all our divisions. This is wholeness as God created it, as God sees it, as God loves it.

Which is why, made in the image of God, love is not something we merely hope for, or even something we aspire to. Through Jesus' birth, love is something we choose to become.

So as we anticipate this most holy of days, let us gaze on the infant Jesus, God made human, and pray the ancient prayer of St.

Augustine, "*Behold who we are given, may we become what we see.*"

Merry Christmas!