

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
5:00 p.m. Celebration of the Holy Eucharist
The Eve of Christmas – December 24, 2017

“Silent Night Today... and Every Day”

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

So... if Christmas happened in 2017, then...

...having received his hotel reservation by text on his smart phone and his custom-made travel plan from AAA showing all the best routes leading out of Nazareth, Joseph loads Mary into the back seat of the SUV where she can stretch out more comfortably for the relatively brief journey. And he places an empty infant car seat up front for the trip home once they are released from the town hospital. And packing their last pieces of designer luggage into the back, he presses the auto-close feature on the rear hatch, jumps into the driver's seat as the door shuts, sets the thermostat for a comfortable 72 degrees, gently presses the accelerator, and eases out into the light afternoon traffic in Nazareth with the wheel turned toward Bethlehem.

Perhaps a modern day Mary and Joseph might manage Christmas nowadays with relative ease. But the truth is so different, isn't it? When our congress revises the tax plan, we file through our accountants or from our computers in the comfort of our homes. But when the Roman Empire revises its tax plan, Quirinius the governor forces his subjects from their homes. Did you know it was some eighty miles Mary and Joseph had to walk? Eighty miles on foot for the privilege of being

taxed by the Empire. And likely they had to travel through the hostile territory of the Samaritans, likely through the bustling, unfriendly, even dangerous chaos of Jerusalem city, hoping they could secure places to stay along the way, only to find that, upon their eventual arrival in Bethlehem a week or so after they first set out, pregnant and tired and afraid, there was indeed no respectable lodging to be found; no lodging at all, until either someone pointed them toward a dusty stable, or they just decided to go in out of the elements and crash there and hope no one found them to throw them out. That's the real story of Christmas. Sore feet and all. And it reminds me of something of real human struggle, a struggle that plays itself out over and over again, in one form or another, generation to generation, from Jesus' day to the present, with too many of God's vulnerable children. Even Christmas isn't immune from struggle. Perhaps especially Christmas isn't immune from struggle. Because in Christmas the people are real, like us, and the problems are real, like ours, yet still we learn something of God's love. *For God so loved the world...*

For God so loved the world that gave his only begotten Son... Wait; let me start again. *For God so loved the world* that we claim every year at Christmas that God somehow managed to enter into the world in Jesus, through a harassed and helpless and very ordinary Jewish couple in very extraordinary circumstances, through the genuine love of a mother who bore him and a father who watched over him, perhaps with the companionship of barn animals for his first night in this world, and with the wonder

and congratulations of the shepherd's union, but no welcome whatsoever from the local dignitaries. This is amazing! And I don't mean the shepherds and the angels and all that Christmas-y stuff. I mean that... for a little while each year, we actually claim to accept the idea that greatness isn't born of magnanimity, of weapons or winning or money or elections or talent or power or speech. I mean, doesn't it feel good each year simply to sit quietly with others on Christmas Eve and sing "Silent Night" in the darkness, knowing that somehow we are in the presence of the light? And this is apparently how God wants Christmas to be: peaceful, simple, humble, joyous, unexpected, and hopeful, even as the cares and trials of the world swirl all around us. Christmas is quiet and simple enough for love to ring out loud. So thank goodness there was a stable in Bethlehem town in the land of Palestine that night, so God could be born to us like that.

But, you know... stables aren't found only in Bethlehem. At one time or another, I expect there were stables in, well, say North Korea too. Stables in Russia, in Syria, and in the Philippines. Stables all over our land; stables in Minnesota, stables in Minneapolis, and well, pretty much everywhere. I guess most of us don't ever really go near a stable anymore, but I would still think that everyone *could* appreciate something of the humility the stable represents as a birthing room for God. If only everyone *would* appreciate it, and if only we all would shape our daily living with a sense of such unusual grace and humility as God did on that night in Bethlehem.

Think of all the places where God can be born when a stable will suffice. What more do we need to welcome God than to build a stable in here [pointing to the heart]?

We've come a long way from Bethlehem in Judea in the time of Jesus. Those of us here do load up in our SUVs, or whatever vehicles we may drive. We make our trips in relative safety, our paths and destinations known to us. And we get together in hospitable spaces, in homes of family or friends in remembrance of the birth of a homeless baby who had only mom and dad to care for him in a barn on a night so long ago. And I am so grateful for this peculiar gift God has given us in Christmas, grateful that it has led so many to desire to be together, to celebrate life, to exchange presents, and to remember joy. But I have to say that a part of me thinks we are far too limited with Christmas. We consign our observances to the "holidays." We call it a "season." You know, we sing "Silent Night" but once each year. What if "Silent Night" was more like the soundtrack for our daily lives?... peace and humility the central tenets for us and for our nation's daily being? What if we Christians took it literally when we sing...

*O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us... today.*

...and then we sang it every day? Then Christmas is no more only a day or a season, only a pause in the hectic and turbulent struggle that has become our world. Then Christmas is part of us today and every day, and Christ is born anew in us... every

day. And hope, humility, and love are the gifts we receive at Christmas, and the gifts we then have to offer to the world.